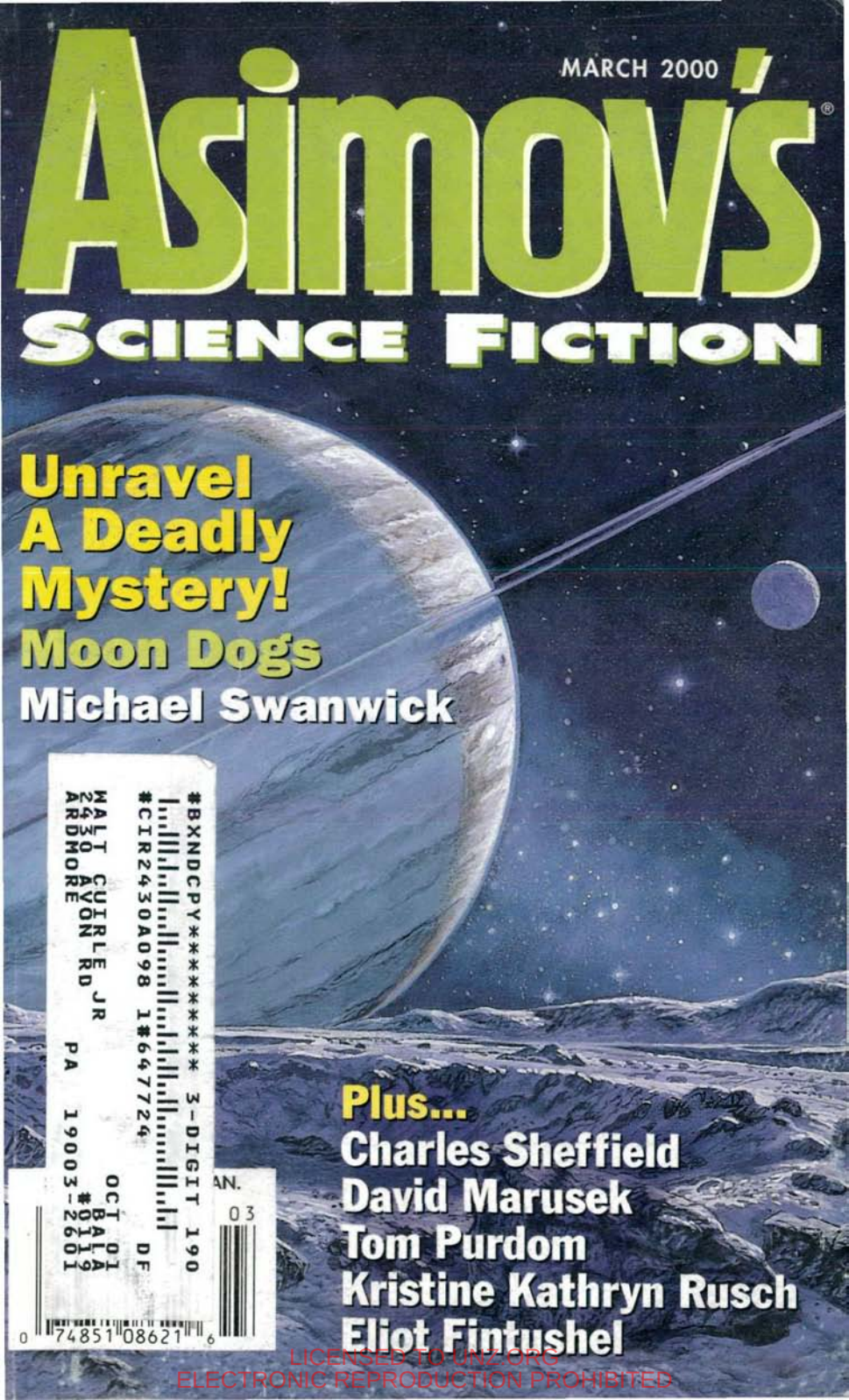

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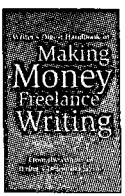

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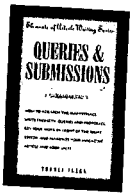

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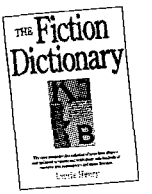

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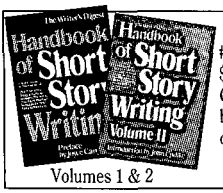

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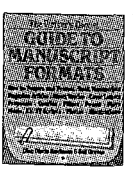

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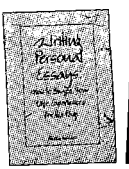

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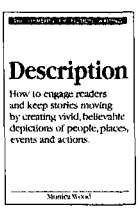
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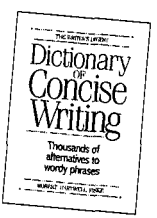

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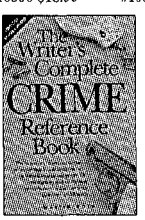

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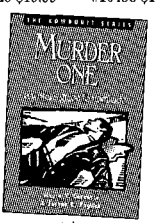

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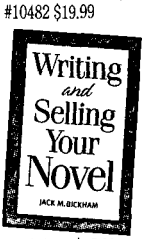

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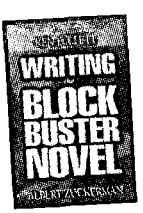

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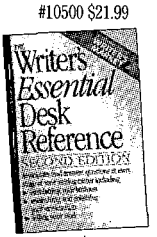

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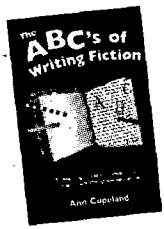

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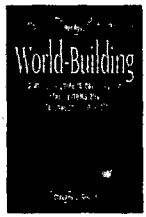

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

SMITHEREENS

Some months this column deals with themes specifically related to science fiction; sometimes I discuss general issues of philosophical or cultural or political relevance; and with some regularity I offer disquisitions on the latest advances in science or technology. This is going to be one of those hard-science columns, friends. Our topic for the month is the Silverberg Theory of Smithereens.

Smithereen Theory—my latest venture into the empyrean realm of serious physics—came to me while I was reading a review of a recent Hollywood film, one of those movies in which a great many things like automobiles, bridges, and high-rise buildings are blown to smithereens. Suddenly, with the force of great revelation—surely you know the feeling—I arrived at this perception:

If things can be blown to smithereens, then they have to be made up of smithereens in the first place.

And, following instantly, this corollary:

The smithereen is the fundamental building-block of the universe.

That was it: a theory that has the fine solidity of the utterly obvious. A porcelain vase is made up of small pieces of vase cunningly smoodgjed together. A bridge is, similarly, made up of small pieces of bridge. A building, a car, a computer, you name it—everything there is is made up of small pieces of itself, joined into a single unitary mass. But you can't take a lot of small pieces of vase and build a bridge out of them. You can't make a car out of fragments of computer. Each of these objects, then, is made up of components that are themselves of a secondary order of stuffness, each unique to its class. *Yet each one of them, a vase, a bridge, a car, a computer, can be blown to smithereens.* So the smithereen is the lowest common denominator of matter. Everything—including you and me and this issue of *Asimov's*—must ultimately be made up of smithereens, arranged in varying ways to form the varying objects that we see about us.

As for the corollary, well, the inherently ultimate nature of the smithereen is demonstrated by the way we use the term. Our language offers no smaller unit. Nothing is ever blasted to *fragments* of a smithereen. We don't talk about half-smithereens, millismithereens, or other fractional quantities. A smithereen is as small as it gets. QED.

But what, actually, is a smithereen? What does the word itself mean? Good physicist that I am, I hastened to the dictionary to see what etymological and philological backing I could find for my theory.

I was disappointed in my hope of finding information about the word in the singular. All the listings were of the plural form, "smithereens," which was not helpful in my quest for the underlying fundamental unit of matter. Still, the entries I did find were useful in their way. The authoritative and reliable Oxford English Dictionary dated the word (as a plural) to 1841, thus placing it squarely in the middle third of the great nineteenth-century upsurge of

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science and technology that brought us the dynamo, the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone: "Small fragment; atoms. Usu. in phrases *to knock* (etc.) *to* or *into, to go to*." The OED linked the term to the colloquial word "smithers," of the same meaning, "smithereens" being the charming Irish diminutive form. (Are you listening, Anne McCaffrey?)

Another valuable source for this kind of scientific research is Eric Partridge's etymological dictionary, *Origins*. Partridge too had no entry in the singular. For him, as for everyone else prior to the moment of my smithereen-theory revelation, it is a plural word.

His entry for "smithereens" referred me to the one for the verb "to smite," under which I learned that "smite" comes from the Middle English word *smiten*, meaning "to strike hard," which itself goes back to the Old English word *smitan*, which meant "to smear." Partridge found himself a little nonplused by the evolution from "smear" to "strike," but thought that the semantic link might involve, perhaps, the concept of throwing mud. As for "smithereens," he tells us that that comes from the ancient Irish word *smiodar*, "a fragment" (at last, a singular form!) and its diminutive *smidirin*, which led directly to the English *smithereens*, "tiny fragments."

So far, so good. Rooted in antiquity, we see, is the notion that if you smite something hard enough, you will reduce it to smidirins. From there to my modern hypothesis of the smithereen as the ultimate unit of matter is, you will surely grant, a very small conceptual leap.

There is, of course, the troublesome matter of the OED's citation of "atoms" as a synonym for "smithereens." The word *atom* itself has a considerable lineage in this conceptual area, and might at first glance be looked upon as holding priority.

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It turns up first in Greece of the fifth century B.C. The earliest known exponent of it was the philosopher Leucippus, who taught that the universe is made up of an infinite number of invisible particles all composed of the same basic substance. This notion was refined by Theocritus of Abdera, who postulated that these particles must not only be invisible but indivisible. He called that ultimate particle the *atomos,* "that which cannot be cut." Objects, he said, can be destroyed, but not atoms. When he was asked how identical atoms could comprise such different things as honey and vinegar, water and stone, fire and ice, he answered by pointing to the letters of the Greek alphabet. Out of those two dozen letters, thousands of words could be formed. "The same letters," he observed, "can just as easily be used to write tragedy as comedy."

It was a fine theory, and it lasted until 1897, when the English physicist J.J. Thomson demonstrated experimentally "that atoms are not indivisible, for negatively electrified particles [electrons] can be torn from them by the action of electrical forces, impact of rapidly moving atoms, ultra-violet light or heat." Building on Thomson's work, the New Zealand-born physicist Ernest Rutherford found ways of peering *inside* the atom, and by 1911 offered a model that showed the atom composed of a central nucleus of positive charge, surrounded by a cloud of negative charges. Out of this came the familiar mixture of sub-atomic particles—protons, electrons, and neutrons—that I learned about in high school fifty years ago.

But the Rutherford theory, ingenious though it was, turned out to need a little fixing, and the fixes involved postulating (and then finding) dozens of additional particles—neutrinos, positrons, mesons (both pi and mu), sigmas, lambdas, quarks of various degrees of strangeness, and on and on and on. I have held earnest discussions about all this with a number of distinguished physicists, most notably Drs. Sheldon Glashow and Sidney Coleman of Harvard. In the course of conversations with Messrs. Glashow and Coleman I have sometimes suggested that they have made all these particles up in cheerful moments of idle fantasy, purely as a way of making the long hours in the laboratory pass more divertingly. They deny this. I suppose my accusation is unjust, since they are honorable men, both of them. But that doesn't mean that their ideas are *right.* Nevertheless, the Nobel Academy people backed Glashow's position some years ago with their silly little prize, and they probably will hand Coleman one eventually, too.

At last, though, I have a theory of my own to refute their nonsense. I offer the smithereen as a simple, elegant replacement for the whole shebang of imaginary sub-atomic particles. For support I cite the philosopher William Occam (1280-1349), who is credited with saying, *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem,* which means, of course, "No more things should be presumed to exist than are absolutely necessary." His principle—Occam's Razor, it is called—neatly punctures the needless multiplication of hypotheses. We don't need no stinking quarks, nor electrons, protons, or anything else. The original theory of Leucippus and Theocritus, modified by Silverberg now that the smithereen has been discovered, does the job quite well with just a single particle.

Or two particles, rather. For my modification of the Greek atomic theory involves the smithereen's counterpart, the anti-smithereen, without which we would have no

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solid matter in the universe. I propose the existence of free-floating anti-smithereens distributed more or less randomly throughout space. When an anti-smithereen encounters a smithereen it sticks to it; a wandering cloud of anti-smithereens, chancing to encounter an equivalent quantity of smithereens, will instantly form an agglomeration of stuff—you know, things like spiral nebulae, stars, comets, planets, moons—

This part of the hypothesis is, I grant you, not yet subject to formal proof. Anybody who has ever dropped a dish has seen sad piles of smithereens, but the anti-smithereen remains, at this stage in my research, utterly conjectural. Nevertheless there is a certain formal symmetry to the concept that I find quite pleasing.

Quite possibly I have hit upon something Really Big here; in odd moments of megalomania I find myself actually awaiting the phone call from Stockholm, though I have to admit that the Nobel Physics Prize was not the particular Nobel that I expected ever to win.

Still—

You read it here first. In the beginning there was the smithereen— O

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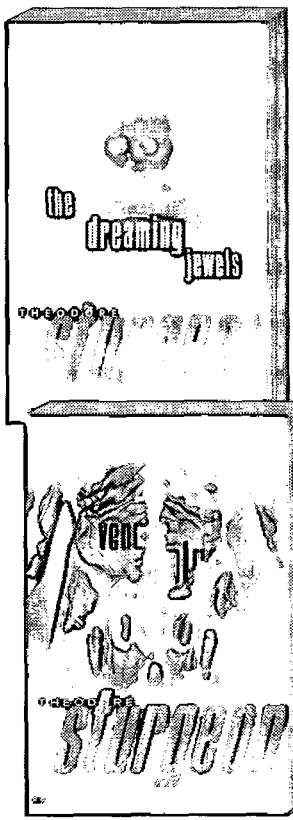

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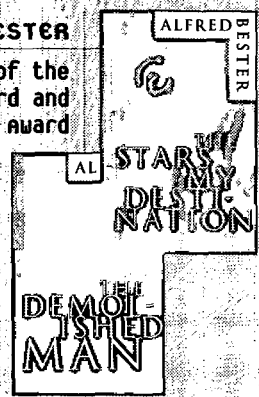

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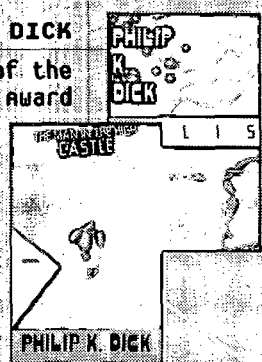

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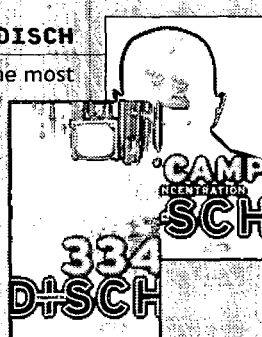

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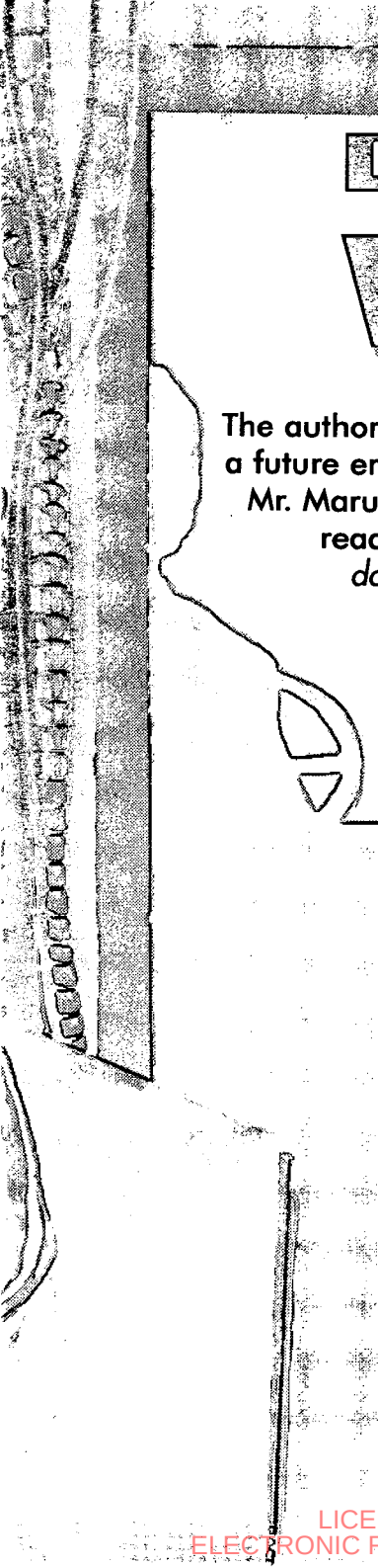
David Marusek

VTV

The author's latest tale is a biting vision of a future era not too distant from our own. Mr. Marusek welcomes comments from readers at his email address: *davidmarusek@pop.sff.net.*

Illustration by Mark Evans



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Tony "Mookie" Jonestone sits in Production Booth "C" absentmindedly devouring chicken salad pitas while applying the finishing touch to a piece entitled, "Jobless Man Backs Mother's Car Over Pregnant Girlfriend's Cat." He views it again all the way through and laughs out loud. Though he's worked on it all morning, it's still fresh and funny. He shakes his head, wipes tears from his eyes, and punches the buttons that will send a copy to Dispatch. Before he does, though, he watches it one last time. Again he cracks up. Damn, it's good. It's low comedy to be sure, but it says something important about suburban life in the new American millennium.

On the other hand, it's just one more piece of hack work.

During the last three years on the Poodle Patrol, Jonestone has become a wizard at turning the raw crap that viewers send in on DVD into pearls of entertainment, like this one. A little editing here, some minimal voiceover there, an occasional sound effect—that's all it takes. His efforts are beginning to attract notice. Just last week an assistant to an associate vice president of the Critter Division told him that his name came up favorably last month at the quarterly oversight meeting. That has to be good, but it's not enough. Three years is a long time to languish in an entry level position. Jonestone is afraid his career has stalled. The whole point of joining the Poodle Patrol, after all, is to get a shot at real journalism.

The production booth door slides open and a pimply face appears. It's Mikey, the foley tech intern. Jonestone waves him in. "My man," he says, patting him on the back. "Thanks for the kitten vocals. They're *perfect*. Sit down; I'll show you."

"No time," squeaks the boy, his strained voice a testament to the urgency of his errand. "They're all like screaming for you in Remote."

"Why?" Jonestone says. "Some circus elephant go berserk?"

"Not Critter Channel. *News* Remote."

Jonestone freezes. News Remote? At first he's sure there's some mistake, but then he thinks this might be it. Still, it's too much to hope for. "They want me to go out on a news story? Why? Where's their people?"

"Bluer's in Baja on Hurricane Babs," replies the intern. "And Williams is in County General for her new liver. Yurek Rutz is in jail again."

"What about Bu'tro?"

"He's doing the fires." The boy's voice cracks. "You're the *only* one here!"

As the name of each veteran reporter is eliminated, Jonestone's hope surges. Could it be true? Could today be the day? Suddenly, like an apparition, Edmund Clark appears in the hall behind the intern. Clark, the most senior VTV producer on the West Coast and multiple Peabody Award winner for such pieces as "Date Rape with Organ Theft," and "Enraged Dad Murders Wrong Family," is one of Jonestone's heroes. Jonestone is speechless.

Clark looks him over and sniffs, "Well? We're not paying you to sit around and gawk. Get a move on, son. Asa's waiting for you in the Bus Barn. Move, move, move."

"Yes, sir!" says Jonestone. He leaps from his chair and pulls on his jacket. "What kind of story is it, sir? Black on yellow? White on black?" This is Clark's own specialty, but Jonestone doesn't care if it's black on black, just as long as it doesn't involve cats or dogs or sharks or giraffes.

"It's political," says Clark. "I'll brief you *en route*."

The big VTV Metrolux van is idling with Asa behind the wheel. Jonestone sprints across the oil-stained concrete thinking, *political?* He doesn't know

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jack about politics. He climbs into the back of the van and pulls its heavy, armor-plated door shut. "Asa, my man!" he yells to the front. But Asa makes no reply, throws the big diesel into gear, and guns it up the ramp. In the back, Jonestone straps himself into the seat behind the mobile deck and brings up the control board. The banks of small monitors blink to life, and he can see the control room back in the studio. To his surprise, Abbie Ford, not Clark, is sitting in the director's chair.

"'Lo, Mookie," she says when she sees him in her monitor. "Heard they'd tapped you for this. It's a big opportunity for you."

"Thanks."

"I'll be doing the play-by-play, assuming the story gets that far." There's movement behind Ford's head. Someone behind her taps her on the shoulder, and she says, "Before I turn you loose, I wanted to congratulate you on that 'Dog on a Leash' bit of yours. Brilliant work. Brilliant. I heard someone upstairs say they've never seen work of that caliber come out of the Poodle Patrol. You certainly caught their attention." She blows him a kiss as she gets up. "Well, gotta go. Break a leg, guy. Y'hear?"

Clark replaces her in the seat. "Isn't that special," Clark says. "Mookie's got a fan." He leans in close to the deckcam and his face fills Jonestone's monitor. "But just between you, me, and the source code, don't let that 'Dog on a Leash' piece of yours turn into a leash around your own neck."

Jonestone recoils at his tone of voice. "What do you mean?"

Clark winks and says, "You know what I mean." He abruptly changes the subject, punches buttons to slave Jonestone's monitors to his. "Let's concentrate on the matter at hand, shall we? Watch this clip."

Jonestone turns to a monitor playing a security camera recording in which a portly man in a crisp suit with a rolled up newspaper tucked under his arm balances a paper coffee cup and strolls across an underground parking garage. But Jonestone hardly sees him. He's thinking about Clark's implied threat. Does he know? How is that possible? Jonestone was careful to cover his tracks. Maybe he just misunderstood, and Clark was referring to something else entirely.

"Jonestone," Clark says, "pay attention."

"Yes, who is he?" The man in the vid is approaching a large, black automobile mostly blocked from view by a massive concrete pillar.

"The late Señor Arturo Moreno, in D. C. this morning on his way to petition U. S. Senator Saul Jasperson for the opportunity to testify before the Pan American Trade Committee."

Not LA politics, Jonestone suddenly realizes, *national!* The man disappears behind the pillar. All Jonestone can see of his auto is its passenger window and rear end, and he gets a tug in his gut that tells him he's about to witness something bad. He wishes the security camera were better placed. Who puts cameras near pillars anyway? He grits his teeth and prepares for the explosion. But instead of a blast, there's a blinding flash that, despite the pillar, momentarily blanks out the camera's pickup array. As the picture gradually returns, Jonestone is surprised to see the car still intact, though its tires are on fire. A thick pall of black smoke sweeps across the low concrete ceiling. Suddenly the clip loops back to the beginning: portly man, crisp suit, newspaper, and coffee.

Jonestone says, "What was that?"

"D.C. police aren't confirming, but we believe it was one of those suncrackers."

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Jonestone's seen something about them. The new tool of paid assassins. A gram of hydrogen plasma generated in a package as small and flat and weightless as a book of matches. No metal parts, no telltale chemical odor. Capable of attaining solar temperatures in a millisecond-long flash. Cheap. The perfect device for effective letter bombs, crank cell phones, carpet mines, etc. "Whatever it was," Clark continues, "it was rigged up inside the car. It vaporized him and most of the car's interior, blew out the windshield. Of course we don't get to see *that* because the freakin' *pillar's* in the way." Clark shakes his head. "What a waste of horse meat."

Jonestone says, "We airing this?"

"Not yet. No one is."

Jonestone watches the flash again on the monitor. "But if we're not airing it, and if it happened in D. C., what does it have to do with us?"

"Check out your data monitor."

Jonestone does so and scrolls through the results of several Lexus searches. The victim's CV. Facts and figures. A mug shot. Moreno was an official of an NGO headquartered in Bogatá called *La Sociedad para la Promoción de Tourismo Indigeno* (SOPTI). Jonestone says, "The Society for the Promotion of *what kind* of Tourism?"

"Indigenous," says Clark. "Part of the cultural assets movement." When Jonestone draws a blank, Clark continues, "You know, if Mr. Gringo wants to come down to photograph us, eat our beans, get sunburnt on our beaches, he pays *us,* not Carnival Cruises, not Holiday Inn." Clark dismisses the topic with a wave of his pink hand. "That whole whiny ContraNafteros thing. Read up on it later. The important thing is that yesterday in a hotel in Belize almost the entire SOPTI board of directors was barbecued by a similar suncracker device. Only two members were absent from that meeting. One was our Moreno friend here—" into his fourth loop of walking across the garage "—and the other a Dr. Josefina Abesea, professor of Aboriginal Goddess Studies at—wouldn't you know it—our own UCLA."

The van takes a corner too fast, and Jonestone braces himself against the transmitter housing. There's a mug shot on his monitor of a woman in her thirties. High cheekbones, café au lait complexion, rather sharp nose, severely trimmed black hair. "You figure they'll do her on campus?"

"We should be so lucky—the place is bristling with cameras. No, so far there's been no collateral casualties, only SOPTI members. We're tapped into the cameras outside her office, but we think they'll do her at home." Clark glances at one of his monitors. "Damn!" He punches a button and says, "Asa, what's taking so long? I thought you knew how to drive." Asa doesn't reply, or Jonestone doesn't hear him, but he sees on one of his monitors what Clark is looking at. A street shot of a nondescript residential neighborhood, a wood construction apartment complex. Tucked into the upper-right-hand corner of the picture is the familiar logo squib of their biggest competitor, VNN. Clark disappears from the monitor, and Jonestone hears him shout, "Ford! Where's my drone? I told you to launch a goddamn drone!"

Hurry up and wait. The VTV van arrives at the apartment complex on a sleepy Verdugo Hills Drive five blocks off Wilshire Blvd. and parks behind three rival news vans. Jonestone moves into the cab to sit shotgun. Asa pointedly ignores him. When the police permit comes over the FAX, Jonestone helps Asa roll out their titanium blastcams and set two of them on the

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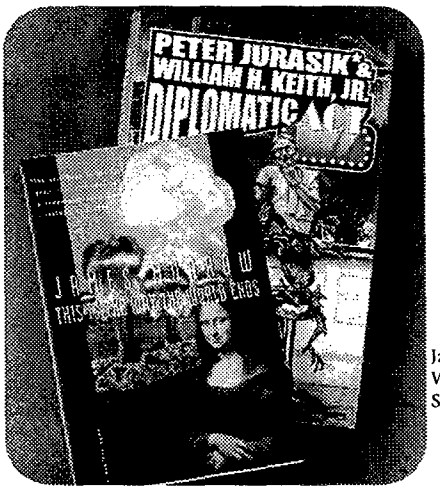

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sidewalk in front of the apartment and two in the alley behind. The blastcams look like huge, foil-wrapped chocolate kisses. They're shaped to hug the ground and deflect a force of up to a decaton of high explosives at close range. They can withstand hurricanes, tornadoes, fire, collapsing buildings, and many other common disasters, all the while producing beautiful, network quality pictures. It's hard work shoving them into place, and the men sweat in the afternoon heat. Jonestone tries to strike up a conversation, but Asa remains sullenly mute, speaking only as the task requires.

By the time they get the blastcams online, word comes in that the VTV dronecam is circling high overhead like a suborbital vulture. Now they can relax, for even if they're forced by events to evacuate the neighborhood, Clark will have adequate coverage.

Eventually it's dinner time. Jonestone checks the fridge and asks Asa what he wants, certain that food will cheer him up. Asa acts like he doesn't hear him. Jonestone has worked with Asa in the past, and they've gotten on well enough. He wonders what's wrong with him now. He nukes two containers of soup and brings them and a dozen sandwiches and cold beer to the cab. "Minestrone or chicken noodle?" he says and sets the tray on the engine housing. Asa shoots him a withering glance and turns to stare out the high, bulletproof windshield at the street. The street is busy now as residents arrive home from work and school. People used to be upset if they came home and found their street lined with big, ugly armored vans with satellite dishes cocked south and electronic peeping gear swiveling like radar. People used to try to push the blastcams away from their houses as though that might lift whatever curse had befallen their neighborhood. But in the nicer neighborhoods, at least, people have learned the drill. Cell phones to ears, they dash into their homes, only to emerge minutes later bearing suitcases, stereos, computers, pets. They'll go to motels tonight and watch their street on TV to see when it's safe to return.

Asa snorts and says, "Lived in the Keys once. Used to be able to evacuate in three minutes flat."

Jonestone mulls this over. The Keys, hurricanes, Hurricane Babs in Baja. Hmmm. "Were you supposed to go down and help Bluer?"

Asa shakes his head and sighs. Jonestone is tired of playing games. He peels the lid off the noodle soup, releasing a cloud of fragrant chicken steam. "Yum," he says. Asa's stomach growls in reply. Jonestone starts dinner without him. He turns on the radio and selects their sister station.

After a few minutes of being ignored, Asa turns off the radio and says, "You're a good kid, Mookie, and it's none of my business how you want to run your career, but I gotta tell ya, that one piece of yours went way over the top. Way over the top."

"Which piece?"

Asa peers at him through slitted eyes. "I think you know which one."

Jonestone consults a mental checklist of his recent work. There was the "Cannibalistic Potbellied Pig," and the one about the "PMS Pit Bull." There was "Who Invited a Boa Constrictor to my Daughter's Slumber Party?" but it was still tied up in court and hadn't aired yet. "Uhh," he says, "was it 'How to Mummify Your Pony'?"

Asa shakes his head. "No, that was gross, but it wasn't cruel."

With a sinking feeling, Jonestone knows which one he means. "My—ah—'Dog on a Leash' piece?"

Asa closes his eyes and nods. "Bingo. Your sicko 'Dog on a Leash' piece.

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Like I said, it's none of my business, but I don't see how you can live with yourself doing something like that. It makes me feel *bad* just thinking about it. I don't *like* feeling bad." He buries his face in his hands. "It sticks in my mind like a canker sore that won't go away."

Jonestone is starting to get annoyed. There's no doubt in his mind that the only reason he's here on his first news assignment is because of that piece. There are plenty of other young turks working their way up through the ranks of VTV's other divisions. They could have chosen any of them to pinch hit this story, but no, they picked him, Anthony Jonestone, because he caught their attention with his "Dog on a Leash." Suddenly he remembers Clark's odd comment earlier and has a moment of panic. "You're right," he snaps, "it's none of your business." He gathers up soup, beer, and sandwiches and goes to the back to eat alone.

The thing is, he didn't have to do a thing to improve "Dog on a Leash"; it was perfect the way he received it. It arrived just like they all do, in a hand-addressed bubble pack on a consumer-grade disk, nothing to distinguish it from the dozens of vids he receives from wannabe Critter Channel contributors each day. He spends an hour first thing each morning popping them into his player and counting to ten. If a vid doesn't grab his attention by the time he reaches ten, he ejects and trashcans it in one fluid flip of the wrist. He almost trashed this one. It looked like a hayseed travelogue, and it started out pretty slow. Two young bumpkins are filming through the windshield of their car.

Now we're turning on Gomper Street, one of them says.

Grain elevators, says the other. A hand flashes through the frame to point. *Grain elevators over there, dickhead.*

They sound boringly high school, and Jonestone's finger is hovering over the eject button when they stop at an intersection, and a pickup truck speeds by. We catch a glimpse of its driver, another farm boy.

Where's Grant going so fast?

Beats me.

The camera quickly pans and zooms to catch the pickup leaving the intersection and frames a dog, an Irish Setter, leaning dangerously over the tailgate on its front paws. It's a beautiful dog, tall and leggy. Light shimmers off its feathery mahogany coat; its pink tongue lolls out the side of its mouth. Jonestone takes one look at it and feels that old tug in the gut.

Leaving the intersection, the pickup hits a pothole, and the dog falls out the back. It rolls on the pavement a couple times, then a rope snaps tight, and the dog is being dragged after the pickup by its neck.

We hear the astonishment of our tour guides. We hear their engine drop into gear and see the picture lurch. There's a squeal of tires, a blaring horn, and a technically killer shot of a near collision as they cut off another car.

Go, go, go! urges the cameraman.

The engine roars as we make the turn. The pickup is half a block ahead of us by now, but the camera's formidable zoom rockets ahead and shows us that the dog has managed to find his feet; he's up and running for his life.

Move it! Move it!

Shut the fuck up!

There's a screech, and the camera lens bangs against the windshield. A station wagon has backed out of a driveway, and we're right on top of it. Our boys are screaming at each other. The girl driving the station wagon looks at us stupidly, so we back up and drive around her, over the curb, on

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top of someone's front lawn. Little kids stand up in a plastic wading pool as we speed by.

We're on the street again, and up ahead we see the pickup has stopped at the next corner, and we almost reach it. We're leaning on the horn.

Flash your lights!

I am! I am!

We get close enough to the idling pickup to catch a close-up of the dog. It's crouched on all fours and panting hard. If a dog can ever have a human expression, this one does. He's afraid. He doesn't understand what's happening to him. Suddenly he's jerked away, never even has a chance to stand up. He rolls through the intersection and is dragged down the street leaving a streak of blood.

Traffic is heavy, and it takes us several false starts to get across. Up ahead we see people on the sidewalk waving frantically at the pickup, but the boy, thinking they're just being neighborly, waves back and drives on. The dog is briefly on its feet, but falls again as the pickup disappears around a bend.

By the time we catch up, the pickup has been stopped by a school-crossing guard. Children are crying. We park and watch the boy get out of his pickup. We see the confusion and fear in his face. We get out of our car and examine the dog in loving detail. The pads have been shorn from his paws. His shoulders are shredded to the bone. But he's alive. *Vinnie!* shrieks the boy when he sees him, and Vinnie splashes his tail in a puddle of blood. The camera seems to become light-headed. It tilts up to look at blank blue Kansas sky. It drops to glance at the tidy frame Midwestern houses, at the children's shoes, at the crossing guard losing her lunch—something with tomatoes. Fade to black.

Asa's food congeals. Jonestone spends a couple hours at his deck boning up on the politics of tourism, the late SOPTI, and Professor Abesea. Meanwhile, his systems monitor traffic in a three block radius around their location. Clark, putting in some overtime at the studio, informs him that Abesea's car is still parked in the university lot, and that the lights are on in her office.

Outside, on the darkened street, a man in a torn T-shirt is stopping at each of the news vans in turn and cursing at them. Jonestone watches him via the blastcams and the van's roof-mounted cameras. The man stands next to Asa's side window and gestures for Asa to roll it down. Asa shakes his head and turns away. Naturally, they can pick up audio, so they hear everything the man is saying. In a gusher of foul language, he reviles them for their greed and inhumanity. He claims to be a resident of the street, and he'll be damned before he lets them scare him into abandoning his home so that big media can orchestrate a disaster. Asa is nodding his head as though he agrees with him. But then the man starts in on Asa personally, calling him a lard ass and exploiter of people's suffering. Asa just shrugs it off. He's heard it all before. Finally, the man spits at Asa. Big, yellow-streaked lugers drip down Asa's window, but not even this pegs Asa's sufferance meter.

Clark says, "That constitutes an assault on our property, Asa. Give him a little squirt of CS. Gas the fucker."

"No, chief," Asa says, "I won't. He's absolutely right in everything he says."

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Clark pauses and says, "Asa, don't get me wrong, but are you sure you wouldn't be happier in some other line of work?"

On the surface, the four-minute, fifty-two second doggy skidmark video appeared to be one uncut take. There was no obvious editing. As such it was extraordinary, worthy of Hollywood—the pure product. Jonestone knew he must secure it for the Critter Channel at any price. On the other hand, it was obviously too good to be true. So, with a heavy heart, Jonestone opened it in his res-editor to take a peek at the underlying code. As with all things digital, a DVD recording tracks more data than simple audio and video. It didn't take Jonestone long to find what he was looking for. The two country tour guides were very skillful. They had expertly smudged the seams, equalized the sound, and calibrated the gamma, but they had naively overlooked the digital watermarks. Without question, footage from two different cameras were cut into the final sequence. Two cameras meant pre-planning, which meant a dog had been intentionally sacrificed in the name of entertainment, which meant that under no circumstances would Critter Channel policy permit him to acquire or air the video. It was an ironclad rule—no animal snuff vids on the non-news channels. Violation of this rule would cost him his job. Furthermore, in accord with VTV's "Family Pledge of Wholesome Viewing," he was required to report the vid to an appropriate law enforcement agency and to send them the DVD as evidence of a crime, in this case wanton cruelty to an animal.

Jonestone's duty was clear. He could not have the video. The stupidity of it all angered him—what a waste of horse flesh.

Clark tells them Abesea has dropped out of sight. He tells them the court has refused them permission to deploy radiant surveillance. They've already been keeping track of heat signatures inside Abesea's apartment complex with IR tomography for some hours. Practically speaking, the court's order doesn't mean they can't snoop, just that they can't record or broadcast the surveillance. Meanwhile, the drone cam has been tracking all rental cars and registered taxis entering their perimeter, but since Abesea might use a gypsy cab or private car, they're forced to monitor all bogies within the proximal.

Jonestone is watching the icon of such a bogey making a suspicious dash toward their location. "Heads up," he calls to Asa. He straightens his tie and grabs a microphone in case he needs to dash out. They watch via the roof cam as a car approaches. But it stops three doors up the street, a man gets out and says something to the driver. He slams the door, and the car continues. Jonestone puts down the mike. False alarm. They relax.

Unexpectedly, the car stops again right next to their van, and a woman pops up in the rear seat. Asa flips on the video lights, as do the other vans, and the street is suddenly bright as noon. The woman is halfway up her steps, pursued by Guy Ray, a reporter from XNBC. But before Guy Ray can catch her, a man—the man let out of the car earlier—emerges from the shadows and knocks him down with a body block. It's all over before Jonestone can react; Guy Ray is lying curled up on the lawn, and the woman is through the front door. She pauses to blow a kiss to her escorts as they drive off. Slick.

"Did you see that?" says Asa. "That was first string linebacker Jimmy Sanchez. The driver was quarterback Mike Lee. She called in their fricken football team."

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Jonestone replays the scene and freezes it where the woman stands at the door. He digitally zooms in to confirm that it is indeed Abesea. In this light she looks softer than in her mug shot. Her lips, as she puckers to blow the kiss, are pillowy. Nice.

On another monitor, Asa is tracking the progress of her heat smudge through the building. The tomography can't penetrate too deep, and she walks in and out of their range. But they manage to follow her to an apartment on the second floor. Lights go on behind shaded windows. They bounce microwaves against the window glass and pick up relayed sounds. Guy Ray, having recovered his breath, climbs the steps and rings her buzzer. They can't hear what he says into the intercom, but upstairs, relayed via her window glass, they can just make out her reply, "Please leave me alone."

Jonestone takes first watch when Asa hits the rack at 11:00 PM. Clark calls it a night around midnight and goes to his office to sleep. Jonestone slouches at the deck trying to stay awake by watching a vid he retrieved from the UCLA library of a lecture Abesea delivered to a class three years ago. She stands behind a poorly lit lectern in a blue suit that looks sharp enough to slice cheese. The school camera is locked in a close-up. Jonestone's not quite awake enough to follow the point of her talk. Something about the dimorphism of tool design. According to Abesea, it seems that since prehistory, men have designed most of their important tools to require a force equal to 35 percent of an average male's maximum strength to operate. So whether he was drawing a bow or literally moving mountains, the physical effort required of him was consistent with his own gender's comfort range. These same tools, however, required 50 percent of an average female's maximum strength. Therefore, she would become quickly exhausted. To Jonestone this sounds both credible and unremarkable.

Meanwhile, Asa's soft snoring is a lullaby to his ears. Jonestone's in that in-between state where he's dreaming to the words of Abesea's lecture. They're in a station wagon. She's driving. By some dream logic, he knows they're married. She complains that it's too hard to turn the steering wheel. Power steering hasn't been invented yet, and it's somehow *his fault.* He offers to drive, and she says, *How typical.*

He awakens with a start and checks his monitors. All systems green. A look outside tells him that two of their competitors are gone. It's hard to commit all this equipment and personnel to such an unhappening story. The vans probably tooled down to South Central where good pictures are there for the taking this time of night.

Just then, a blastcam light goes from green to yellow—it's detected motion. Jonestone studies its pale night vision image. He doesn't see anything; a bird or cat might have triggered it. But the other blastcam goes to red. This could be it. "Asa!" he calls. He quickly examines all their exterior cams—nothing. He quarters a screen and has the computer replay the last five minutes backward, meanwhile keeping an eye on the others in realtime. Asa is still snoring, so he swings around and punches him in his side. "Wake up!"

The roofcam detects realtime movement, and all the cams zero in on it. From four angles Jonestone sees the ghostly green image of a woman in a bathrobe walking across the street. Asa climbs down and squeezes into the narrow space. "'S happening?"

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"I don't know. I lost her." His cameras are in search mode again. Suddenly there's a knock at the rear door. Cautiously, he opens it and looks down. There she stands, Dr. Josefina Abesea, Ph.D., in a brief robe and pink, fuzzy slippers, hugging herself against the night chill. "Hello," Jonestone says awkwardly. "I'm Tony Jonestone of VTV News." He almost slipped and said Critter Channel. "Would you care to come in and answer a few questions?"

She hesitates. She has to think about it. Finally she says, "No, thank you. I couldn't sleep, and I needed to know something. I thought maybe you knew."

"Try us. If we don't know, we have the whole world net at our fingertips." He waves to indicate the deck.

She nods and proceeds, "In your country, at what hour do the police come to kidnap you?"

"Sorry?" Jonestone says. "What hour?"

"Yes. In my country it's between three and four in the morning. We call it *turno de noche,* the time when the death squad is working. What time does that usually happen in the United States?"

"Asa?" Jonestone says.

"I'm on it," Asa replies, tapping a keyboard to initiate a search.

"This may take a few minutes," Jonestone tells Abesea. "Won't you come in while we wait?" He glances at the dark street behind her, feeling ever so much a target.

"I apologize. I didn't mean to put you to any trouble," she says and retreats a few steps in her flip-flop slippers. "I'll return to my house now."

"No, wait," Jonestone says. "Please stay."

She glances around at the dark street and says, "I think neither of us will enjoy the luxury of sleep; perhaps I can offer you coffee."

"Yes, I'd like that." At that moment the van behind them switches on its blinding video lights. Jonestone says, "Go inside; I'll join you in a minute. Hurry!"

She crosses toward her building, but the reporters cut her off. Jonestone is about to climb down and come to her aid when she pepper sprays one of them, and the others make way. When she's safely behind her door, Jonestone grabs a duffel bag and stuffs gear into it.

Asa says, "You're nuts. You want to get blown up along with her?" Jonestone peers at himself in the john mirror. He rubs his stubbly chin; there's no time to shave. He combs his hair while swallowing mouthwash.

"Tell 'em to wake up Clark," he says, pressing an earpiece into his ear. He slaps a fresh mike patch on his throat. "Take a level. One two three. One two three."

"I recognize your name," she says. They're sitting at a chipped formica table in the breakfast nook of her miniature kitchen. "Are you related to Moses Jonestone?"

Jonestone smiles. "My famous uncle." He can't take his eyes off her. In the kitchen light the sheer silk of her robe hugs her like rose-patterned skin.

"I know your uncle's work. We studied him in university. He's hanging in my living room." She points to the next room with a slender arm. When she gets up to pour the coffee, her backlit robe suggests dark shapes and compelling shadows that Jonestone is more than glad to examine. He wonders

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if he's misunderstood this whole Aboriginal Goddess thing. Still, he's not distracted enough to have forgotten the danger he's in just by sitting here. He'd like to mount the cameras and get out, but asking permission is often a tricky business. If you come right out and ask, they usually refuse. Abesea serves him frosted biscuits. She sits down and crosses her legs. With so short a robe, this is a delicate maneuver.

"Tell me," she says, "why I am about to be murdered, and nobody cares."

"How can you say nobody cares? There are three live broadcast news vans parked across the street."

"Yes, but why nobody is broadcasting? Even my murdered colleague and good friend, Mr. Moreno, God rest his soul, is not on the big window. Why is that, Mr. Jonestone?"

She dunks her biscuit into her coffee and catches the sodden end with her lips. Watching her do this a couple times, Jonestone feels his erection getting an erection.

Asa updates him in his earpiece, *Clark's back in the control booth. He approves your move but wants you to wire the place and scram ASAP.*

"I mean," says Abesea, unaware of Asa's intrusion, "don't you put terrorism on the big window any more?"

Mookie, do you copy? Asa says, and Jonestone clears his throat. *Good,* Asa says and continues, *as far as that* turno de noche *goes, you can tell the professor that if you took all of the nocturnal abductions, disappearances, and break-ins in the U.S. and Canada since 1973, the mean time for that would be 3:48 AM.*

Jonestone clears his throat again and glances at the kitchen wall clock, a plastic rooster thingy with swiveling eyes. It's 1:52.

Abesea is still talking. "A heroic man travels to your country to warn your Congress about a conspiracy to pervert free trade in the southern hemisphere, and he's brutally murdered in the very capital of your country, and what's on TV?" She points again to the living room. "Grown men swallowing live guinea pigs. Nude darts tournaments. And on *your* channel, a prison lottery to serve on an execution firing squad." She throws up her hands. "I don't understand. I thought I knew how things work in the United States, but now I see I don't."

"Then I'll explain it to you," Jonestone says. "Your colleague had the misfortune of being killed off camera."

She sits there uncomprehending. "But the security camera?"

"His car was parked behind a support pillar. The security cam got nothing. Why? Didn't you watch it?"

She jumps to her feet and leaves the kitchen.

Jonestone finishes his coffee. He scouts the ceiling for the best place to stick a camera. Whatever she's doing is taking a while, so he gets up and wanders out to the living room. One whole wall of the living room is covered by a flatscreen TV wall. The sound is off, but the big window shows haydivers leaping from small aircraft without parachutes and gliding their falling bodies into oversized haystacks. This is, at best, an iffy sport.

Jonestone can hear Abesea talking on the phone in the bedroom. On the wall next to the bedroom door hangs the eposter he knew he would find, his famous uncle's photo at the top of the deck. The eposter is a large, expensive, museum-grade, tera-pixel model loaded with the MoMA exhibit of a few years back entitled, "Glyphs of the Twentieth Century: The Grammar of Images." It contains the exhibit's ninety-six images that scholars claim to

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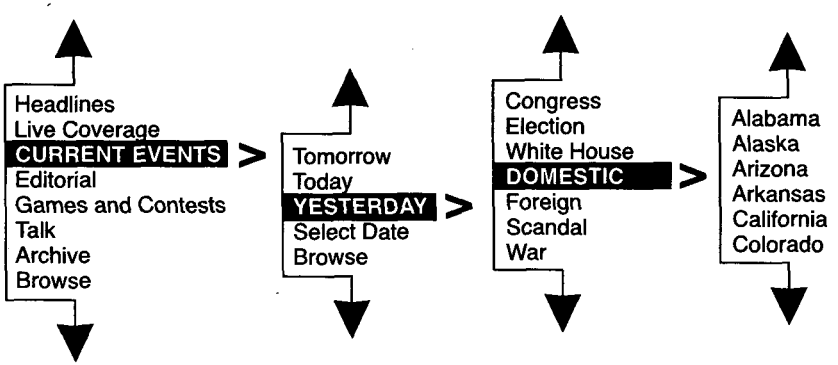
be so universally familiar as to have helped engender (along with TV and the Internet) the new proto-language of glyphography. Included are such hits as: "Napalmed Naked Girl of Vietnam" (1972, Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut), "The Explosion of the Hindenburg" (1937, Murray Becker), "The Vat of Kool-Aid at Jonestown" (1978, Frank Johnston), and his uncle's contribution, "Wrong Number" (2000, Moses "Mookie" Jonestone).

Abesea dashes from the bedroom and scowls to see him standing there. "Sit, sit," she says, raking magazines, pizza boxes, soiled laundry, dirty dishes, and toiletries from the couch. She sifts through the clutter searching for something. In disgust, she gives up and says loudly to the room, "Remote!" They both hold still a moment to listen, but the TV remote doesn't reveal its location. "To hell with it," she says and turns to the TV wall. "I have no patience to teach the TV my accent in English or Spanish," she explains apologetically before loudly addressing the wall, "TV, go to VTV political channel!" The TV seems to understand her well enough. The haydivers shrink to a small inset window along the top of the screen with the other twenty-four insets that make up the VTV network constellation. (Jonestone sneaks a look at the Critter Channel inset and sees it's playing a Cockroach Smashorama rerun.) Meanwhile, the Political Matters inset expands to fill the giant screen. It's showing a drone's-eye view of a hilly battlefield of the war, now in its 1034th consecutive day. Nothing much seems to be happening on the ground.

"If you can show this, why can't you show me?" Abesea says, but before Jonestone can reply, she shouts, "TV, show political channel menu." The menu tree unfurls, and Abesea threads her way through it—



—until she finds, a dozen layers deep, the listing of her former colleague's short stroll through the parking garage. "TV, authorize payment," she says, and they watch the clip play through. "Shit," she says as the suncracker flash subsides. "Amateurs." She returns to her bedroom.

This time Jonestone follows and stands outside her door, but he can't keep up with her rapid-fire Spanish. He finds himself standing again in front of his uncle's photo. The eposter controls on the frame show that she has three other images selected to rotate with it every seventy-two hours: "Jack Ruby Shooting Lee Harvey Oswald" (1963, Bob Jackson), "Spanish Civil War, Moment of Death for a Loyalist Soldier" (1936, Robert Capa), and "Shooting of Viet Cong Prisoner by South Vietnamese Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan" (1968, Eddie Adams). Abesea is a fan of fatal gun-

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shots, it would seem. His uncle's photo portrays a Chicago telephone repairman high on a utility pole the split second a bullet exits his forehead in an eruption of hard hat and skull fragments. What makes it memorable is the look of utter astonishment on the man's face as he's flung against his tether. He has no idea what has happened to him, only that it's bad. "Wrong Number," the title tacked on by the editor at the Chicago *Evening Standard,* tells the story. The bullet came silently from out of the blue, most likely discharged from a gun over a mile away during some unreported urban firefight. Or perhaps it was one of those stray bullets people fire into the sky never thinking about them coming down again. Someone who flunked high school physics.

Abesea stands behind him looking at the eposter over his shoulder. She startles him when she says, "First time I see it, I say, hey that's me!"

"Yeah, me too."

He can feel her breath on the back of his neck. She says, "So tell me how this works. If they kill me tonight, will you broadcast it?"

He nods.

"So why not start before I'm dead?"

He's about to reply, but he feels her fingers lightly brush his hair, and he says, "You want to be on the big window tonight?" He feels her press her body lightly against him. He says, "I'll just set up the cameras," and goes to the kitchen.

He tears open fresh cam-packs with his teeth and sticks them in strategic locations on the ceilings of the various rooms. Abesea follows him silently. He activates the cams with voice code, and Asa confirms reception in the van.

Her bedroom is a shrine to towering clutter. Jonestone removes his shoes before stepping on her bed to reach the ceiling. Her blankets and sheets are twisted together like insomniac lovers.

When they return to the living room, she stands in front of the TV wall and pages through the VTV channels. She has found her TV remote. "Where are they?" she says. "Aren't they working?"

"TV," Jonestone says, "MJTVT twenty niner five." The TV wall divides into cells, each showing a different room of her apartment, the views from the four blastcams, and the van. They are time stamped, 02:11. In one of them, Jonestone and Abesea stand in front of the TV wall in front of Jonestone and Abesea standing in front of the TV wall and on and on in an infinite tunnel of video feedback. "Asa, fix the living room cam." A moment later the feedback is phased away.

Abesea surveys the wall and says, "Good."

Jonestone says, "It's still only closed circuit. We're not broadcasting yet."

"Why not?" Abesea says peevishly. "But at least you're recording, yes? So if something happens unexpected, you got it, right?"

Jonestone says, "Asa?"

Clark answers instead. *Yeah, we're toasting. Get a release and scram out of there.*

"Everything's being recorded," Jonestone tells Abesea. "Please state your name and tell us whether you agree to VTV's exclusive ownership of all the recordings we make in your apartment including all rights and proceeds from their use and sale in all media in existence and all media to be invented in the future." She does so. "Good," he says and collects his duffel bag.

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"Wait," she says. "You're not leaving?"

"Yeah, I, ah—have to return to the van."

"But I thought you'd wait with me?"

"I'd like to," he admits, aware that Asa and Clark are listening in, "but my job requires me to be in the van."

"Aren't you going to interview me? Don't you reporters interview people anymore?"

Interview her from the van, says Clark.

"You can't interview me after I'm dead, you know."

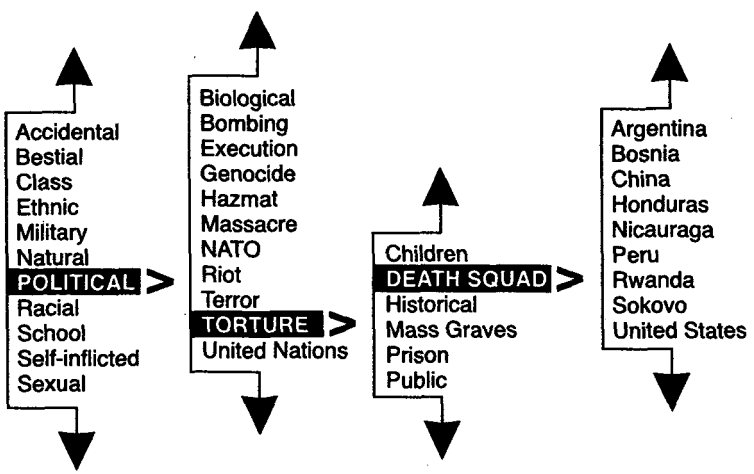
Jonestone checks the time stamp on the TV wall—2:16. He straightens his jacket and trousers, stands in the ceiling cam's sweet spot, counts backward from three, and says, "I'm in the home of Dr. Josefina Abesea, the sole surviving member of the Society for the Promotion of Indigenous Tourism, a Pan American organization headquartered in Bogatá. Tonight she keeps vigil for her life after unknown terrorists have brutally murdered her SOPTI colleagues. Dr. Abesea, please explain to our viewers what message is so explosive that assassins would murder an entire organization to keep it from the American public."

Abesea composes herself to reply, and despite her brief attire, manages to assume a professional air. "Thank you, Mr. Jonestone; I will. My organization believes that American consumers are fundamentally compassionate and fair-minded people who are unaware of the worldwide harm and injustice done in their name. We believe that by bringing these facts to your viewers' attention, the American people will themselves act to correct these grievous wrongs. Sadly, our message does not get through. Even the evidence that we have turned over to your network, to VTV, is suppressed."

I smell a rat, says Clark. *Anyone else smell a rat?*

Jonestone says, "Could you give us an example of what kind of evidence you're referring to?"

"Gladly," she says and uses her remote to open the VTV menu on the TV wall. "This is a tape we sent you over a year ago."



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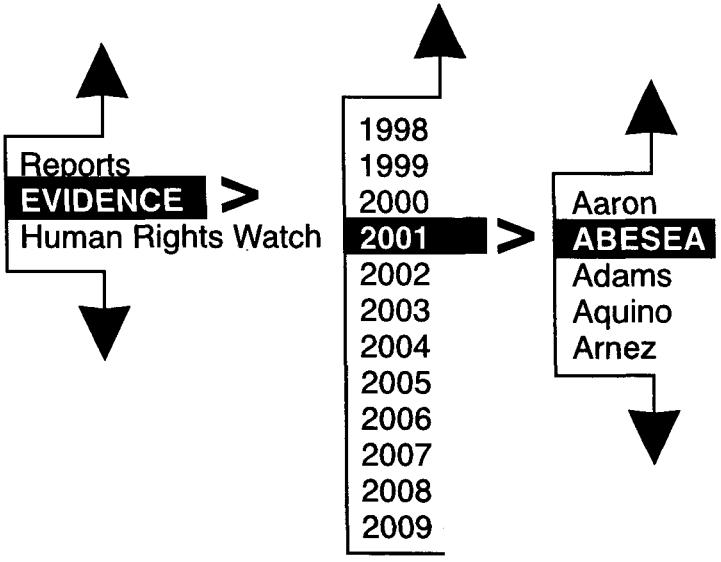
"Instead of showcasing it in a news program, your network chose instead to bury it deep in your pay-per video archives."



The payment box says, "Diego Abesea," runtime 5:46:31, cost $ .28, *checkbox* Accept *checkbox* Cancel.

"This tape was made by paramilitary forces in the year after I joined SOPTI. It's only one of over fifty such tapes we've sent you." She checks the Accept box, and the TV wall momentarily blanks while the selection is retrieved and streamed. "These tapes are made by individual soldiers as personal souvenirs. We acquire them at great risk to ourselves."

The entire wall fills with an out-of-focus swath of olive drab. As the camera pulls back, we see a blindfolded boy with a cut cheek and nose out of joint. His hands are shackled behind him. He straddles a weird frame like a sawhorse made from iron pipes. His feet don't quite touch the floor. A man in civilian clothes, carefully keeping his back to the camera, straps iron weights to the boy's ankles to make him heavier. All of the boy's weight bears down on the narrow pipe at his crotch.

Jonestone notices the greenish cast and uneven focus of the picture. The camera's motor sound is audible over American rock and roll music playing in the background. This video, no doubt, is the product of old consumer-grade VHS technology.

Abesea approaches the TV wall and stands fascinated before the life-sized boy. She reaches out to touch his cheek, then shudders and turns to Jonestone. "The basis of a successful 'interview,'" she says, "is the level of uncertainty you can instill in your subject. Simply stated, once pain is sufficiently established in a subject, the *threat* of further pain is more effective in altering his behavior than pain itself. Fear of being maimed is more compelling than actual maiming.

"Here you see the apparent subject—my brother—soon after he was disappeared on his way home from school. His interviewers haven't demanded

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information from him. They have barely spoken to him. He asks them what they want because he wants to cooperate. My father has taught us always to tell everything. But when he asks they hit him, so he doesn't ask any more. We see much fear etched in my brother's face. The interviewers have made a good start in establishing a businesslike rapport with him."

Jonestone notices she is no longer speaking to him. She is addressing the camera over his head. Her voice reminds him of her classroom lecture. She's lecturing the American public. He figures that she expects to be dead when this is aired, and she's making good television, so he doesn't interrupt.

"He will sit on that pole for hours. They have trussed him so that he can't fall over and relieve the pressure on his genitals. Right now his testicles are very painful, and that is the most frightening part of the whole experience. Soon they will become numb, and that will frighten him even more. He will worry that the damage is permanent. My brother is only thirteen in this video, and he wants to be a papa someday."

The screen goes to video noise for a second, then the picture creeps back up in that characteristic way the old camcorders had. Someone has paused the tape. "Oh, yes," Abesea says, "the interviewers will switch it off several times during the session. They have to in order to fit it all on one cassette, and they don't want the tape to run out just when they get to the good part. It's humorous, really, to hear the interviewers call out, 'Hey, man, how much tape is left?' and for the reply, 'Hurry up, only ten minutes.' It must be sad comfort to the subject to know his life will soon end because of the limits of technology. Good thing the soldiers have no budget for your new digital stream cameras, yes? Then the fun would never stop."

She looks at the TV wall behind her. "As we can see, some time has passed, probably three or four hours. My brother looks not so worried now. He has made up his mind that he will surely die this night, and oddly, the knowledge has given him new courage. My brother is a brave young man." Here her voice falters, and she pauses before continuing. "I think his interviewers cannot have missed this change in him. Thus we are at a turning point. At this juncture, good interviewing technique calls for an intermission. They should remove him from his hobby horse, put him in a cell with a little water. Let him recover his strength. Keep him in isolation for several days. This will trick him into thinking the worst is over, that he will live after all. Sensation will creep back to his sex organs. He will be buoyed up with optimism.

"All of which will make it easier to crush him completely in the next interview." On the screen a man—his back to us—goes to the tied-up boy and punches him twice in the kidneys. We can hear the assailant grunt with his effort. We can plainly hear ribs crack. Other soldiers in the cell laugh. Abesea paces back and forth in front of the TV wall without looking at it.

The man leaves, and a second man removes the boy's blindfold. The boy, in pain, confused, looks away from him, desperate not to see the face of his persecutor. Nor can we see him except for the back of his head. He has black hair, cut in a military fashion. There's a little bald spot on the crown of his head. He puts a clear plastic bag over the boy's head and secures it around his throat with a Velcro strap. He tells someone to move the camera, and when he turns around, he holds his hand in front of himself to hide his face.

The camera zooms in to record the boy writhing in animal panic, straining against his bindings in an attempt to tear the smothering bag from his mouth. The men laugh. "The eyes!" one of them says in Spanish. The naked orbs of the boy's eyes are bugging out. His eyelids are turning blue.

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"Obviously, something has gone wrong," says Abesea. "Why don't they remove him to a cell where he can recover? What reasons can we discover for the soldiers to prolong this interview beyond its logical intermission? Could it be—" and here she pauses to address the camera—"could it be that no one believes this child is the keeper of any secrets? Is he but a surrogate for some other subject?" She resumes her pacing.

Behind her the boy abruptly slouches forward on the pipe frame, unconscious and not breathing. The man hurries to remove the Velcro strap and bag. He thumps on the boy's chest several times with the heel of his hand. The boy gasps and gags and slowly regains consciousness. Though the man again holds his hand out to block the camera, we see fragments of his face—first his chin, then his left eye.

Abesea says, "They're giving him a breather. This interview method is called 'the submarine.' They will make him dive three more times. Each time it will be harder to revive him, until . . ." Her voice fails. She hides her face in her hands and turns away from the camera. Without thinking, Jonestone goes to her and gently wraps his arms around her. Her robe is damp, and she's trembling like a bird. Meanwhile, he watches the TV wall behind her where the man bags the boy a second time. This time it's not so easy. The boy, mad with fear, fights for his life. He twists and wrenches his upper body and butts his head to avoid the bag, and the man has to punch him into submission. Jonestone can't help but marvel at how gripping the tape is, and he wonders if the others Abesea mentioned are just as good and if so, why are they buried in the archives.

Jonestone jumps a little when the TV wall picture suddenly changes to the monstrously huge, puffy-eyed face of Clark. *Now, isn't that sweet,* Clark says in Jonestone's ear, *Mookie's doing the compassion thing. I hate to break it up, but I will anyway. Your assignment is to cover the story, not to be drawn into it. You've got the place bagged, so to speak, so it would be a good idea for you to return to the van immediately.*

Jonestone looks directly into the ceiling cam. He knows Clark is right. He's been in the biz long enough to know that a journalist's place is on the sidelines. But when he tries to disentangle himself from Abesea, she clings to him. "Please," she whispers. "Please."

"I'll just take you to your room," he says, "then I really must leave." He draws her to the bedroom and seats her on the edge of her bed, but she won't let him go, so he sits next to her.

"Don't you see?" she says. "If you stay they won't dare to hurt me."

"That's not necessarily true."

"But I am so afraid. I don't want to die tonight. Please stay a while."

"I wish I could."

"Then stay until I fall asleep. You can do that for me? I won't be afraid if you hold me for a little while. Just until I fall asleep. Then leave, okay? It's such a small thing, but it would mean so much to me."

The clock on the bedside table reads 2:36. It's still early. "I don't know," he says as she climbs into bed and curls up, uncovered, on the bare sheet. She pats the space behind her for him to join her. He tears his eyes from her and looks up at the Bedroom Cam as though to seek instructions. Abruptly the blinking red tattletale switches to green.

What happened? Clark shouts in his ear. *Asa, what happened to my feed?*

Looks to me like they could use a little privacy, Asa says.

Privacy? Privacy for what? Asa, turn that camera back on now.

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Don't worry, Chief. He's safe for the moment. The street is quiet. I'll turn it back on when he leaves.

Asa, this is going into your personnel record. Jonestone, I'm not going to say this again. Do yourself a favor and listen to the voice of experience. Evacuate this instant. Jonestone?

Jonestone pinches his throat mike off. He dims the bedroom light, shuts the door, and takes his gear bag to the window. He tapes little rattle dazzles to the glass window panes to confound the microwave pickups. He drapes a curtain of tinsel across the outer wall to scatter their heat signatures. A little privacy to do the compassion thing. He stands over the bed and looks at the woman curled up in a tight fetal knot. Her short robe doesn't quite cover her ass, and he sees that she's wearing no underwear. The things one must sometimes do for one's profession. He removes his shoes and places them next to the bed. He lies down on the bed but immediately gets up to remove his jacket. This he places carefully next to his shoes. Finally he settles in next to her and molds himself to fit her shape. Her skin is ice, so he disentangles one of her blankets and draws it over them.

She whispers, "Thank you."

"Don't mention it." He rests his chin on the crown of her head. She smells of shampoo. He keeps an eye on the little bedside clock—2:41. Little by little she relaxes in his arms. He listens to the intercom chatter between Asa and the studio. Clark is helping to monitor vehicular traffic. Soon Jonestone thinks Abesea is asleep, so he tries to creep away, but she clutches his arm.

"Make love to me."

"What?" he says. "No, I have to leave."

Under the blanket she hitches up her robe and urgently rubs her bare butt against him. She draws his hand to press against her breasts. "For me, *por favor*."

Jonestone tries to ignore his throbbing cock and to think his way through this rationally. He calculates that this favor can be granted fairly quickly. And if it means so much to her—like a condemned prisoner's last request—how can he refuse? His reasoning strikes him as sound, and with one more glance at the clock, he's unbuckling his belt and kicking his trousers off the bed to land next to his jacket and shoes. He leaves his socks, briefs, and shirt on, though.

When he tries to turn Abesea toward him, she resists. She's still curled up in a little knot, so he kisses the back of her neck and rubs her shoulders. She's all bones, and he likes that. He kneads her shoulders and back and works down her knobby vertebrae. Absentmindedly, he nibbles the lobe of her ear, and she jumps. He's not sure if from pleasure or surprise, but he concentrates his ardor on her ear, kissing it, licking inside it, and nibbling around its edges. He thinks maybe she's responding? He stays with the ear for a while, wetting it and puffing tiny breaths into it, meanwhile reaching down to stroke her pussy. But her legs are drawn up and clamped shut, so he returns his hand to her breasts. Sometimes small-breasted women are extra-sensitive there. It seems to him as though he's searching for a chink in a suit of armor.

Suddenly he hears men's laughter in the living room and he about has a heart attack. But it's only her brother's vid. Angrily he shouts at the closed door, "TV turn off!" But it doesn't hear him.

What was that shout? says Clark.

The interruption has thrown Jonestone off his game. "Come here, baby,"

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he whispers and tries again to turn her toward him, but she resists. He tries harder, and she grabs the side of the mattress. If she won't turn this way, maybe she'll turn the other. Gently, he tries pushing her face down on the bed, but she simply refuses to budge. "Honey," he whispers, "you're acting like you're not into this."

"Please," she says.

He looks at the clock—3:04. Damn! He levers her bottom to get a leg under her and tries to guide himself in from the rear. She's locked up and dry. He lubricates himself with spit and goes at it, pushing and probing till he's in. No, he's not. More pushing and probing till he's afraid he'll cum too soon when at last, he's in.

Jonestone starts a gentle rocking motion with his hips as best he can in that awkward position, digging his toes into the mattress for purchase. He knows he'll have a wretched backache in the morning. And for what? This woman's about as juicy as an old sock. Nevertheless, after a little while it starts—his orgasm.

It starts, as usual, as an achy sensation deep in the muscles of his ass. It spreads like heat to his belly and rises to inflate his chest. He relaxes a little now because once the engine turns over, he can slow down and enjoy the ride. It's 3:08, and all's well. All systems go. The Earth begins to move. All you need is love.

He hears a thin cry from the living room and promptly ignores it, except that he flashes on the face of that torturer. Suddenly without breaking his rhythm, inspiration drops on Jonestone like a blastcam. Here's the story, of course! Story? Hell, here's the mini-series! Although that son-of-a-bitch torturer hid most of his face most of the time, he exposed himself in bits and pieces throughout the tape. It would be child's play for Asa and the other wizards at VTV to patch together from those fragments a composite mug shot of him. Not to mention the voiceprint they can lift from the sound track. Yes, Jonestone has no doubt that they can *positively* ID the man. And isn't this, after all, the age of retribution? The era of truth and reconciliation? Isn't the War Crimes Tribunal still grinding out human rights trials on the Hague assembly line: Rwanda, Bosnia, Cuba, Kosovo, South Africa, Iraq, etc., etc.? Jonestone could put together a team to go down there and find this guy and accuse him before the American viewing public! He's probably living the good life now, has a cushy job, a wife and family. But VTV could haul him into world court. Or if we can't, we can turn his world to shit, live on air. We can put so much heat on him that whatever paramilitary he worked for will decide to disappear *him*. With a little pre-planning and some hi-tech bugging, we can get *his* kidnapping live on air, too!

Jonestone notices that while he was having his little brainstorm, his body has lurched into caveman mode, a state of grossness that both disgusts and delights him. It has picked Abesea up willy nilly and turned her face down on the mattress. She's still curled up in her damn fetal position, but that lifts her pussy to a comfortable height, and he's in there banging away so zestfully that her head thumps against the wall. His orgasm is fully cocked and loaded now, all the way from his teeth to his toenails. There'll be no stopping it. It will express itself.

Jonestone, meanwhile, can't wait to get back to the studio. If they have one torture tape in their archives, they'll have a hundred. And all he needs is a dozen proof-positive IDs in a smattering of countries to make this a mini-series that he knows he can sell to the brass. This is his big break.

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They'll love it. They'll love it so much they'll take him off the Poodle Patrol forever and put him in the news division for sure. He has to hurry because this idea is so good someone else is bound to see it too and beat him to it. Someone like Clark.

It's 3:12, and Jonestone cums with all his might, mainlining Abesea with buckets of pure product in rippling body shouts of joy.

Spent, used up, satisfied as much by his inspiration as by the sex, he rolls off Abesea to catch his breath. He knows better than to fall asleep, despite how tired he is. Five minutes. He'll take five minutes to enjoy the glow. Then he'll make tracks to the van. He thinks about his story idea, how he'll work up a quick proposal, who to pitch it to, what to call it, etc., etc. Abesea hasn't moved. She's scrunched up like a discarded doll, her face turned the other way. Jonestone wonders what it would be like if they were a couple, an item. They'd get up in the morning and make breakfast. She'd go off to give her lectures, and he'd cover big, important stories.

Something's happening, says Asa.

Yeah, says Clark, *and XNBC has just broke the suncracker clip on their big window. We're following suit.*

Jonestone sits bolt upright in bed.

Asa says, *Our blastcams in the alley have gone red. I see movement in the shrubs along the back of the building.*

Jonestone, if you can hear me, this is your last chance. Asa, enable that camera.

Jonestone leaps out of bed, grabs his clothes, opens the bedroom door, and peeks into the living room. The TV wall is ablaze with pictures. All aspects of the story are playing at once in a circus of insets along the sides of the big window. Ford is in the headbox in the upper left corner of the screen anchoring the broadcast. She's deftly weaving all the separate insets into a coherent story: the Moreno parking garage clip, background on the SOPTI, the Belize barbecue, a late-breaking interview with Senator Jaspersen, Abesea's living room lecture, her dash up her front steps, and—in the big window—a live picture of two figures climbing to the roof of the apartment building. At the bottom of the screen is an animated banner that reads, *LIVE—LOS ANGELES TERROR STRIKE* beside the ever-morphing VTV logo. As Jonestone watches, a new inset opens to show the dimly lit bedroom with Abesea on her bed. He can just make out his own shadowy figure getting dressed in the doorway.

You've got about five seconds to exit before I put the Living Room Cam on the air, says Clark.

Jonestone doesn't need to be told twice. He makes a beeline for the door. But halfway there he's arrested by the sight of Abesea in an inset on the TV wall. Without turning in bed, her hand reaches to feel the mattress behind her, feeling for *him.*

There's a crash of breaking glass somewhere on the floor above him. He pinches his throat mike and says, "Asa, where are they?"

Above you and over a couple of rooms. When you leave, take the stairwell to your left. And hurry.

He turns around and walks toward the bedroom.

Stop right there, son, says Clark. *You're heading the wrong way.*

"There's still time to get her out, too."

Forget it. That's not how things work. You report the news; you don't make the news. At least not if you still want a spot in our newsroom.

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Jonestone looks up at the ceiling cam. "What's that supposed to mean? That a reporter can't save a person's life?"

He continues to the bedroom, but Clark says, *What do I have to do to get through to you? Yank your leash?*

"What?"

You heard me, Mookie. I'll drag you by your leash all the way to the division president if I have to. Then you won't even have the Poodle Patrol to fall back on.

Jonestone hesitates at the bedroom door. Abesea looks so peaceful lying there. It would be easy to scoop her up in his arms and whisk her to safety.

Asa says, *If you plan on leaving, right this instant would be a good time.*

There's the sound of police sirens in the distance. With one last, lingering look, Jonestone runs to the hall entry door, reaches for the handle, and freezes when the doorbell chimes. At that moment the big window switches to the Living Room Cam, and Jonestone sees himself, large as life, standing at the door with his mouth hanging open.

Ford, in the headbox, is saying, "Now VTV's exclusive coverage takes you live into the—Mookie? Ladies and gentlemen, here is VTV reporter, Anthony Jonestone, who has participated in Dr. Abesea's long vigil tonight. Tony, what do you have for us?" Immediately along the bottom of the TV wall appears the banner, LIVE—EXCLUSIVE—ANTHONY JONESTONE.

Clark says, *Close your mouth, son, and start talking.*

"I—uh." There's a knock at the door, polite but insistent. Jonestone looks at the door as though he's never seen a door before. A teleprompter insert opens before him on the TV wall. The words scroll, *Good morning, Abbie. As you said, I've waited through the night here at the home of SOPTI activist . . .* and although Jonestone mouths them, no sound comes out.

Again a knock, this time as though by the impatient butt of a gun.

Abesea emerges from the bedroom. Her hair is disheveled and her cheek creased by the bed linen. She rubs her eyes and demands, "What is going on?"

"They're here."

"Then let them in."

"Are you crazy?"

"Why? You think you can hide from them? You think if you don't open the door they'll simply go away? What a stupid person you are. Don't you know they can kill us from the hall? They can leak poison gas under the door, or start a fire, or blow up the whole building. They don't need to come in." She crosses the room. "In my country, when Death knocks, you try to greet him with a little dignity."

She flings open the door, and two men enter, dressed in black clothing, ski masks, and gloves. They wave ugly machine pistols and herd Jonestone and Abesea against the TV wall. They act surprised to see themselves projected on the wall, and they search around until they find the camera on the ceiling. One of them, a well-built man with wide shoulders, aims at the camera, but the other one says, "No, leave it."

"You better shoot it," says Abesea, "you coward. The whole world is watching."

"Shut up," he says, jabbing her in the ribs with the barrel of his gun. "We don't care who is watching us kill you," he says in heavily accented English. "Better everybody watch. Say good-bye. First you," he points his gun at Jonestone. "Say good-bye to your family."

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Jonestone only stutters.

"Enough!" says the man. "I pity you." He points his gun at Abesea. "Now you."

Abesea is not shy for words. She's waited for this moment for years. "You think you can frighten me with a gun?" she says. "You are wrong. I am not frightened. It is you who is frightened, you who hides behind a mask. My name is Josefina Margarita Abesea. I say that proudly to the world. What is your name? What is the name of your superiors? How many people have you murdered? How many women? How many children? Where were you trained? Were you trained here in the United States? Were you trained at the CIA's School of the Americas?"

The man throws back his head and laughs through his mask. "So many questions, *bonita.*"

"Then answer just the first, if you are a man and not a coward. Tell us your name. Tell us your real name."

"As you wish, but first I kill this one." He steps up to Jonestone and points his gun at him. "No, turn around. Face the TV." Jonestone turns to the TV wall and stands behind the life-size projection of himself. It's like he's standing behind himself. The masked assailant slowly raises his gun and points it at him, the other him. That man is about to die. "Here it comes," says the assailant, "in living color."

"Wait!" Jonestone whispers.

The man lowers the gun. "*¿Qué?*"

Jonestone can hear the sirens stop on the street outside the apartment. So close, yet so far.

"I'm waiting, *señor.*"

"Please—please don't kill me," Jonestone says.

The man puts his hand to his hooded ear. "This *capuha,* I cannot hear you. Say again. Say so whole America hears you."

"Please don't kill me!"

The man looks at his accomplice. "What do you say, *jefe?* We should show our mercy?"

The other man takes a moment to consider, then says with finality, "No, kill him."

The assailant says to Jonestone, "I regret to report that your request is denied." He raises his gun again. "Say good night."

Jonestone's bladder lets go, and he pisses himself. The man on the TV wall in front of him is visibly quaking. Jonestone watches as the assailant points the muzzle of the gun into that man's ear, and slowly squeezes the trigger. The gun explodes with a blast that hits him on the side of the face. It hardly hurts at all. Inexplicably, the men turn the guns on each other and blast away with water. Water? Jonestone's thoughts are stuck. Am I dead or what? The men pull off their masks, exposing their faces, and bow to the camera.

"These are toys," one of them says, "and we are unarmed." They toss their replica squirt guns away from them. The man takes Abesea's hand and kisses it. She pulls him to her and kisses him on the cheek. "I am Arturo Moreno," he tells the camera, "and on behalf of my friend, Miguel, and myself, I apologize for this hoax we are playing on you. We have tried for years to bring a message to you, our friends in the United States, but your Congress will not listen to us, and your media corporations will not sell us air time. So this is the only way we can reach you directly."

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Jonestone is still watching the TV wall, standing with his back to the room. Arturo Moreno? But he's dead, murdered in the parking garage.

"You can turn around now, *señor,*" Moreno gently says to him. "No one will kill you any more. Go outside and tell the SWAT team we surrender."

Jonestone turns. It's all so confusing. The two men move to the middle of the room, lie face down on the floor, and lock their hands over the backs of their heads. Abesea is staring at him, a mixture of triumph and pity in her eyes. "You heard him," she says. "Go! You're dismissed."

Jonestone climbs in the back and slams the heavy door. Asa shakes his head, then goes up front and starts the engine. It's a long, long drive back to the Bus Barn, but it would please Jonestone if they never arrived. He sits behind the deck; the seat is wet. No, his pants are wet. He sees in the monitors that the network has cut its losses and moved on to another story, an early morning murder of a Hollywood starlet. You can always count on So-Cal to fill in the gaps.

He sees that no one has turned off the ceiling cams in Abesea's apartment, so he watches as Moreno and his pal are led away in handcuffs. Abesea is standing in front of the TV wall delivering another lecture. Apparently she thinks she's still on the air, but she's wrong. They're not even recording any more.

Jonestone pots up the audio and hears her say, ". . . such as forced confessions, making false accusations against family and friends, and sham executions. And what are the long-term effects of this? Anxiety, crippling depression, and irritability. Paranoia, guilt, and suspiciousness. Think what this does to a family. Sexual dysfunction. Loss of the ability to concentrate—your mind wanders, and you can't focus on anything." She has poise and authority. "Insomnia, nightmares, weight loss, memory loss. So many losses. And perhaps the greatest loss of all—loss of the ability to perform as a citizen of one's own community."

Jonestone is too tired. He's completely fried. He closes his eyes and rests his head in his hands. He's a little surprised to smell her odor still on his fingers. It reminds him of their night together. With all that's happened, he's almost forgotten that they had good times, too. In his mind's own monitor, he sees himself still lying there as the morning light streams through her bedroom window. She's curled up next to him like she was. He imagines he smells hot biscuits somewhere. Biscuits and bacon and fresh coffee. Hesitantly, her hand slides behind her and finds him. "You're still here!" she says. "You didn't leave me alone. You took care of me."

Without opening his eyes, Jonestone reaches out and cuts the audio, cuts the ceiling cams. "Yes, I'm still here," he tells her. "Where else would I be?"

And then, like a morning glory, she turns, uncurls her slender limbs, and opens herself to greet him. O

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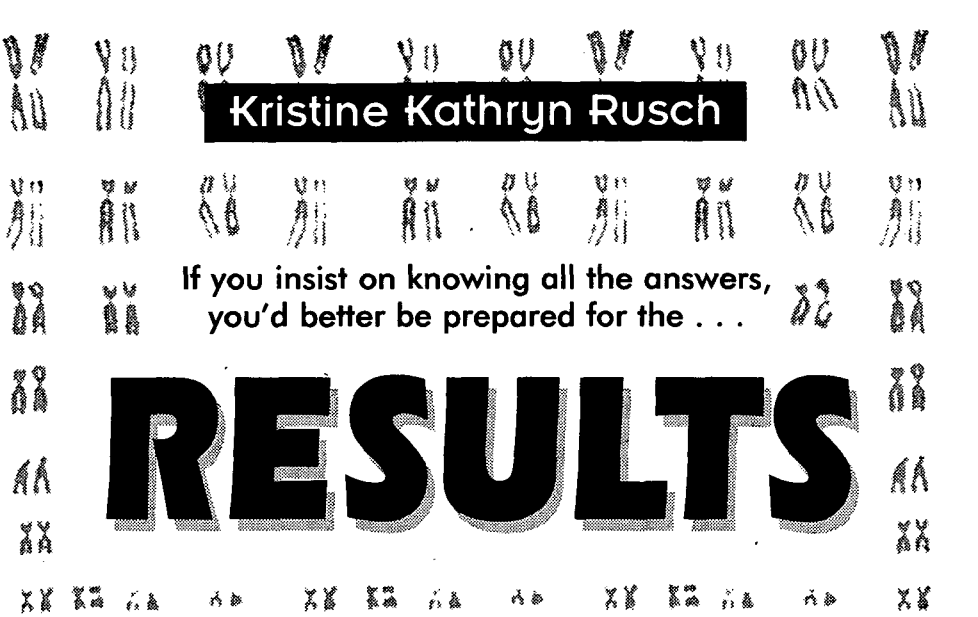

Do it now, do it later. Do it when you're twenty-five, do it when you're forty-five. Each choice involves risk. Each choice involves an element of chance. That's what her parents fail to understand. They don't realize that the world she faces is different from the one they knew.

Jess stands, feet apart, in the subway car. It's half full, but all the seats are taken, and she holds the metal bar. She loves this antique method of travel in a city that hasn't updated itself in any real way for nearly a hundred years. New York, she heard a colleague say, is becoming America's first European city, a lot of people in a small space, history crammed against the future, land buried so deep no one remembers what grass looks like.

She loves it here. The past mingling with the future. Making the present bright.

Her parents, stuck in Des Moines, surrounded by grass, just don't understand.

She leans her head against the metal bar. It's cool against her scalp. The clickity-clack of the cars along the old track is somehow comforting.

She should have called her folks last night. They paged her three separate times after the test. But she wanted to wait until she had results, until she had something new to say instead of going over the same old arguments. She's twenty-five, old enough to make her own choices. Old enough to make her own mistakes.

Her parents thought the testing was mistake number one. It certainly was expensive enough, but the doctor said he advised it for any couple about to get married. If they're genetically incompatible, he'd said, they have the choice of terminating the relationship, planning for an expensive future, or tying tubes—practicing irreversible infertility, as one of her friends called it.

Options. That's what her parents don't get. It's all about options.

And results.

Her stomach flutters. She wonders why tests are always a production,

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why now, in the days of instant communication, results must wait a day, a week, sometimes a month. The doctor said that while communication might be instantaneous, science is not. She wonders if that's true, but doesn't really know.

The train stops at Times Square. She gets off, walks away from the smell of exhaust, a smell that will remain on her clothing all day. As she emerges from the tunnel, the city assaults her: sunlight thin as it trickles between the buildings, cars honking, people yelling, a jackhammer rat-a-tat-tatting two blocks away.

Her mother asks, *How can you raise a child there? There are no lawns, no quiet places,* and Jess says, *There are plays and museums and concerts.* And her mother says, *How're you going to afford that, honey?*

A little boy on a leash stops in front of Jess, and she nearly topples over him. He's blond and curly haired, with enormous blue eyes that twinkle as he investigates a spot of gum on the sidewalk. New Yorkers form a path around him, like a river diverted by a stone, but she glances over her shoulder as she passes, sees the young man who is his caretaker, a black-haired, blue-eyed man, who does not have the look of wealth. A nanny perhaps? Or a lucky man, a man whose genetic code needed no tampering at all.

She wants to turn around, go to the man, ask, *Did you choose the right options or did you wait and see what nature would provide? Did you trust the process?* As if there is still a process to trust.

She lets herself into a side door, an unmarked rusted metal door that has been on Broadway since time immemorial. She goes through back hallways that lead to the box office of a theater whose name has changed ten times in the last five years, each name with the claim of authenticity.

At the end of her hallway, the box office. Hot and squalid, air-conditioning fifty years old and inefficient. She puts on small headphones so that she can hear her phone conversations without interrupting anyone else. She actually works on an ancient keyboard, the office computer plugged into a dozen services from the venerable TicketMaster to the brand new E-SEAT. It is her job to take the calls requiring her to deny someone's pleasure, helping the angry, the frustrated, or the very wealthy find the right ticket to the right show and then, promptly at five, go to the box office itself and do the same thing in person, hand out tickets ordered by mail, soothe the customers who arrive on the wrong night, and press a small button beneath the shelf to get the manager who will discreetly lead those who get angry onto the street.

The job pays very little and she only has it because human beings still expect to find, beyond e-mail and the digitized voices, a human face, a real person which, as her parents used to say, is becoming increasingly rare.

Her fiancé Bryan's job is marginally better. He is a short-order cook in a restaurant near the George Washington Bridge. He gets home as she's leaving for work. They only have evenings together.

She puts on her headphones, hands shaking, the day already seeming longer than it should. Results, she knows, could come today, tomorrow, or next week.

Results.

What are you going to do with them? Her father asked. *What if there's nothing catastrophic? What if you're somewhat compatible? Then what will you decide? Will you base your entire future on a set of numbers, on percentages that have no meaning?*

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She had no answer for him when he first asked the question, and she has none now. She goes through her morning's backlog, checks to see if she must return calls, and finds no personal messages. Then she deliberately fills her mind with times for this season's remake of *Fiddler on the Roof,* the latest Oscar Wilde revival, the newest—and probably last—play by Mamet, the one that deals, unsurprisingly, with the indignities of manly old age.

By the time the call comes, she has put the test out of her mind and is surprised to hear Bryan's voice. He knows that personal calls are forbidden, so he speaks fast:

"The results are in. Meet you at our special place at one."

"How bad are they?" she asks, voice breathless. She hasn't realized until now how shallowly she's been breathing, how much she has invested in this single moment, in knowing what the future will bring.

But he does not answer her. In deference to her work—and how much they need her paycheck—he has already hung up.

She takes another deep breath, feels the air go in and out of her lungs. Only once before has she been this conscious of her body, and that was when the lab tech pricked her finger—painless, the woman had promised, but a prick was a prick, sharp and sudden and a little bit invasive. Jess watched the blood well, a dark, rich, red, and she wondered what secrets it would reveal.

Now she'll know.

Bryan already knows.

And he is going to make her wait two hours before he tells.

Their place is Washington Square Park. She used to work in the neighborhood, and went there for lunch, sometimes a dog or a knish from a vendor, sometimes a sandwich bought at a nearby deli, sometimes a banana brought from home. What she ate then wasn't important, it was the brief moment outdoors, even if it meant sitting in a park more concrete than grass with trees that were spindly because of the dirt in the air.

Bryan worked nearby too, and they sometimes sat on the same bench. They never talked, not until some tourist—coincidentally from Iowa, like they both were—couldn't figure out how to use her new camera and desperately wanted a picture to e-mail to her uncle Syd.

They still laugh about that. *Technology,* Bryan says, *is what brought us together.*

Technology, Jess always adds, *that most people don't understand.*

Now they are facing another side of technology. One she is sure will tell her if the life she wants is something she can have.

She almost splurges and takes a cab, but at the last moment, she remembers how many more expenses there could be. The subway is old. It creaks and groans and her friend Joan swears it'll one day just fall apart, but it gets Jess to the park with time to spare.

She does not buy lunch. She knows she will not be able to eat. She sits on their bench and waits for Bryan, who is uncharacteristically late.

He has chosen this place for its symmetry. Symmetry is important to Bryan. It is, in his mind, an element of perfection. Only she cannot guess exactly what the symmetry is.

Are they here because they will decide what their child will be? Or are they here because they will commiserate together, knowing that to bring a child into this world will either be too costly or too dreadful?

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She does not like the waiting. Fortunately she told her boss she might be late. He knows that this is an important moment for her, and he understands.

The park is full of children: in strollers, in parents' arms, running around the benches. These are not the perfect children she usually sees. They have bad skin, mismatched features, eyes that are slightly crossed. They are not perfect. There is no intelligence in their faces.

These are the children of the poor, the desperate, those who will not listen to their doctors or cannot afford one. Those who believe that they must go through with a pregnancy no matter what. Those who cannot afford in-the-womb enhancements. These are the children who will be, in the-not-too-distant future, A Burden on Society.

Maybe that is why Bryan chose this place. To remind her about the costs of making the wrong choice.

She sees him emerge from the subway, head down. He is balding ever so slightly, just a lighter spot at the crown of his head. He used to joke before they got the test that he would make certain none of his children would go bald.

He hasn't made that joke in weeks.

He makes his way to the bench without a second glance at the children. When he reaches the bench, he does not touch her.

Instead, he hands her his palmtop. On it is an e-mail already opened. She skips the salutation and the signature, reads the body instead.

Percentages fill her brain. She glances at the high ones first, expecting something awful—a high chance of spina bifida or Alzheimer's Disease. Instead she sees none of that. The high percentages are silly: 97 percent chance of child having blond hair. 96 percent chance of child having brown eyes. 98 percent chance of child being tall.

It is in the middle percentages that the problems strike: 47 percent chance of having an IQ above 120. 36 percent chance of having artistic talent, acting talent, musical talent. 24 percent chance of having strong athletic ability.

Mediocre. The test results show that their child will be mediocre. At best.

She scrolls through the e-mail, searches for anything positive, anything that will negate this bizarre news. She sees instead the layman's explanation of how the figures are arrived at. Her IQ, lower than Bryan's, brings down the total score. His physical abilities mismatch with hers; her talents do not go with his. They are genetically incompatible. Already they are, before her first pregnancy, failures as parents.

She does not raise her head. She doesn't want to see the children playing across from her, screaming, laughing, not knowing that, in some undefinable future moment, their poverty will catch up with them and hold them back.

Their parents' decision to bring them into the world will make them Burdens that no one else can measure.

What you don't understand, honey, her father said when she told him of the test, *is that there is more to children than statistics.*

I remember your first real smile, her mother added. *Whenever I'm sad, I think of that.*

Sometimes, her father said, *the best accomplishments are small ones.*

Bryan takes the palmtop from her hand. He puts a finger under her chin,

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looks into her eyes. His are brown, just like hers. They both have blue-eyed great-grandparents, hence the small percentage chance of a blue-eyed child.

"Maybe we should just go home," she says. "Forget the museums and the parks. Our parents will love a grandchild, any grandchild—"

He puts his finger over her lips. His skin smells of lemon polish and garlic.

"It won't work," he says softly. "We aren't the right choices for each other. You need someone who'll add to your scores. So do I."

She inclines her head back so that his finger no longer touches her mouth. "Let's think about it."

"No. I want a child I can be proud of. I don't want—" he grimaces at the baby in the stroller beyond, the baby with ears too big for his tiny face "—something I'll always regret."

Besides, her father said. *Statistics are just that, statistics. They're not proof. What if they're wrong?*

They can't be wrong, Daddy.

All right, he says, *but sometimes people beat the odds.*

"Maybe we should try," she says.

He puts the palmtop in his pocket. "I was afraid of this. I was worried that you wouldn't believe the results. We can't afford a lot of enhancements, Jess. We have to go with our combinations. Maybe if we were rich—"

"We can wait," she says. "You'll get a better job. So will I. Then we can try."

He shakes his head. "Don't you remember what the doctor said? Your eggs will deteriorate with time. We'll have to have more enhancements rather than less."

Her eggs and his sperm. Deterioration isn't just a female thing. But she doesn't say that. She knows him too well. He has made up his mind, and has done it without her.

"You can do what you've always wanted," he says. "You can act now instead of work box office. You can become someone."

Someone who can pay for a child who will be perfect. A child she wants to share with Bryan who will, by then, be gone.

"It's all about chances," she says. "Risk. Maybe we should just do it the old-fashioned way. Our parents did."

He nods, but doesn't look at her. She flushes. Suddenly she realizes how he read the report. The failures are not his. They are hers. The way her body combines with his will produce a result he will be ashamed of. Whenever he looks in his child's brown eyes, he will always see this report. A 47 percent chance of IQ above 120. And if the child is not as intelligent as Bryan wants, he will blame her.

He will always blame her.

No matter how many museums she goes to, or how often their child smiles. No matter how much simple joy that young life will bring them, Bryan will always see the failure.

He gets up, kisses her on her crown where she—and all the people she has descended from—have a full shock of hair, and makes his way through the crowd.

She sits on their bench, knowing now what the symmetry he sought was. It is over. Sure, they will divide possessions, figure out who inherits the apartment, maybe even sleep together for old times' sake. But the future, the bright shining future, is gone.

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She sits on the bench for the rest of the hour, watching the children, searching for their parents. Women sit on other benches, occasionally look toward the playing children, smile, and continue their conversations. The smiles are warm ones, contented ones, as if the children's high spirits are infectious.

What would their results have looked like? Ninety-eight percent chance of brown hair? Seventy-five percent chance of gray eyes?

Nowhere on that form was an area for percentage chance of bringing joy. Nowhere was there a space for all the years of laughter, now denied.

She has choices of her own to make. All of them involving risk. All of them involving a world that has changed even beyond her understanding.

This morning she thought it irresponsible to have a child without knowing the risks. But she hadn't known the greatest risk of all. The risk of believing the statistics, reading too much into the numbers.

Perfection is not possible.

Would Bryan have been satisfied with a 53 percent chance of an IQ above 120? She never thought to ask.

Until an hour ago, she hadn't even known the answer for herself. ○

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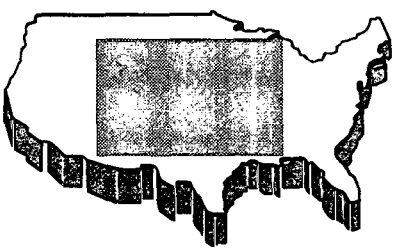
Charles Sheffield

NUREMBERG JOYS

Charles Sheffield's last appearance in *Asimov's* was back in July 1996, with "Cloud Cuckoo." His most recent books are *Starfire* (Bantam), a science fiction novel, and *The Borderlands of Science* (Baen), a work about science for science fiction writers. Concerning the latter book he says, "It has in it everything I know about anything, so no one need ask me a question ever again."



People change in twenty-five years, but I find two constants: the eyes, and the body language. Although Chen Xiao was in the middle of a group when he came into the interview room, even with the wrinkles and receding hairline I picked him out at once.

His task was easier than mine. The men with me were all uniformed guards. Chen gave me a formal nod and said, "It has been a long time, Leon. You are looking well. Is your treatment to your satisfaction?"

His grammar was accurate but his accent not quite perfect. The many years abroad had made a difference.

"Better than I expected," I said, "as a condemned criminal. It's a fair description, isn't it?"

He swung the only other chair in the room so that he could fold his arms along the back, and sat down. "You are not a criminal, Leon, unless and until you're convicted by the International War Tribunal. I will do my best to see that doesn't happen. I am one of your defenders. The others working with me have excellent credentials."

"The others. Some Americans, or all loyal members of the Chinese Liberation?"

"You must be reasonable, Leon. They are of course Chinese. After all, your side did lose the war. But they are first-rate, and although your legal system is not ours, your trial will be conducted in a way that you will approve. I promise that you will not be abused, coerced, or browbeaten in any way."

"Will I be interrogated?"

"Let us define interrogation. You will be questioned, inevitably. But in a totally humane way. No drugs, no sleep deprivation, no physical hardship. Just a stimulated scan, and I'm told that the process is more fascinating than it is uncomfortable. Also, I will be present at the stimscan searches. If you feel fatigue or want to stop for any reason, I will insist that the session be suspended. And I'll say one other thing. *Without* the stimscan evidence, I cannot help you at all."

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The whole thing was a farce, but I had to know. "The stim searches. I've heard of them, of course, but I've heard conflicting things. Do they read a brain, or don't they?"

"Wait until tomorrow, and you can answer better than I. I have conducted many stimscans but never had one. I'll tell you what I am sure of. The stims evoke memories, and they stimulate automatic writing, but they cannot create a memory or make you write something you didn't write in the past."

"How do you know that?"

"Look, if you feel nervous we'll postpone and give you time to read about it. With your brains and scientific talent, you'll pick the principles up fast."

"I'd rather begin tomorrow. I want to get this over with."

"Still the same compulsive Leon. Tackle the problem head on, go through it like a power drill. We'll make a good team. It will be uphill work, but I have some hope that you'll be acquitted."

"I doubt it." My next words may have been a mistake, but at the time I felt sure they would make no difference. "I'm innocent of war crimes. I know that, and I think maybe you do. But you have your own agenda. I remember Lavoisier and Marat. I'll be convicted and sentenced to death. You'll make sure of that."

"Lavoisier and Marat?" For a moment his air of goodwill vanished. "I do not understand the reference."

"Look it up, Chen." Bound in the chair as I was I couldn't walk away, but I leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I ignored him, and after half a minute I heard him say, "All right, tomorrow then. We'll begin tomorrow. But you're not being fair to me, Leon, and you're not helping yourself. I'll do my best to see you cleared, but it won't be easy. You provided the idea that killed thirty million of my people."

I heard the clatter of boots. I stared at the ceiling for another minute. When I looked again, the room was empty of everyone but the guards.

It is odd how we grasp for the familiar, no matter how unpleasant. I didn't like Chen Xiao and I didn't trust him. But when I was taken for my first session, surveyed the people standing around the table, and failed to see Chen, I was unreasonably upset. There were a dozen of them, serious, decent-looking men and women, identically dressed in the pale blue uniform of the Chinese Liberation Army. Some would be prosecutors, some members of my defense team; I could not tell the difference.

"Where is Chen Xiao?" I asked, wondering if anyone would understand me.

"He will be here in time. The stimscan sessions were his idea." A gray-haired woman, who spoke with the clipped speech pattern of a translation implant, nodded to the chair. "If you are ready, we can dispose of the preliminaries."

And if I was not ready? Behind the invariable politeness there undoubtedly lay other forms of persuasion.

"I request that you do not begin until Chen Xiao is here," I said, and sat down. In front of me on the table lay a pad of blue paper and a selection of pens. Securing straps went around my chest and waist. The metal circlet that the woman placed around my head was cool, but not uncomfortable. As an electrode was attached to my left wrist and a spray I/V to my right, Chen came hurrying in.

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"My apologies." He gave me a look of reproach. "Marat and Lavoisier. You do me an injustice."

During the night I had wondered the same thing. I had taken my suspicions of Chen's vengeful nature and my own troubled conscience, and treated them as proof. Before I could say as much, I heard a faint ringing in my ears and I was gone.

It is Wednesday morning, and I am sitting at the round polished table in the front room. The electric fire over to my right is not enough to take the chill out of the air, and I am cold. I write a final line of equations and glance at the wristwatch sitting on the table in front of me. Twelve o'clock. I am in the middle of a question, but according to my own rules I am out of time. I can finish the problem later—I will feel obliged to do so, before I can relax—but since each exam session will last for just three hours, so must my practice runs.

This one has gone pretty well. I stuck badly on one problem, but I am absolutely sure of half a dozen others. I lay down my pen and stand up to stretch my back. I have been thinking and writing without a break since nine, oblivious to everything except the problem sheets and the hands of the watch. Now other sensations cut in. I am hungry. I can hear the dog barking in the kitchen, and I know that my father is home for lunch. A heavy truck goes rumbling along the road that runs past the front garden of our house. I glance out of the bay window but I am too late to see it.

In a few minutes my mother will call me through to eat and as I sit down my father will demand to know how things are going, although he has no comprehension of anything connected with my studies. I hate his vague but insistent questions, and I want to postpone them for as long as possible. At least I have finished. Worse is when he comes home early, sticks his head into the front room, and starts talking. He never realizes that it is an interruption.

I walk over to the black lacquered upright piano standing against the wall opposite the electric fire and strike a chord with my right hand. The Schumann piece I was practicing yesterday is still on the stand. I move to sit at the piano stool—

—and was staring at a ring of intent faces, gathered around the table.

"Much too early," Chen was saying to the others. "He is still a student, preparing for his comprehensive examinations."

He pointed to the table, littered with a dozen sheets of paper. I saw to my surprise that they bore writing in a familiar hand—not my crabbed scribble, but the neater and more disciplined cursive of my youth. I had written that page of answers just ten minutes ago—over thirty years ago—ten minutes—reality suffered an abrupt bifurcation, and I put my hand to my head.

"Are you all right?" Chen was bending over me, concern on his lined face. Concern for Leon Hinsley, or for his star prisoner in the war crimes trial?

"A bit disoriented. But you were right, it is fascinating. I can keep going." I had a sudden desire to see the face of my mother, not in old age but as she had been in her late forties.

"Not today." At Chen's nod the sheets were collected and labeled. "We have to do some analysis. It is rare for us to miss the target period by so big an interval. However, as I've been telling my colleagues from the beginning,

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you have a remarkable brain and the normal stimscan rules may not apply. We will try again tomorrow."

So it was back to my room, for another day of enforced idleness. Chen had promised there would be no brainwashing, but of course for many people day after day of solitude and isolation from all external stimuli *is* a form of brainwashing. For me it wouldn't be, not normally. Two years ago I would have taken it as an opportunity for serious work, and enjoyed myself. Bertrand Russell said that he never had a more productive period than when in prison for protesting the First World War.

Lucky Bertrand Russell. Six months on the run had changed me. My room had the added "luxury" of a small table, chair, and pad of paper, but I could not concentrate on work. In the brave new world of the Chinese Liberation, higher mathematics no longer seemed to matter. I paced my white-walled and windowless cell, three steps in one direction, three steps in the other. My thoughts were all personal. I was baffled by my vivid recall of animosity toward my father. I didn't remember it that way. Was it possible for a stimscan memory to deceive?

I also thought about Chen, my sometime colleague. His office had once been next to mine. Hard-working and organized and gregarious, he was popular at the Institute; but I interacted with him daily and knew that he lacked any creative spark or feel for mathematical form. It was largely on my recommendation—or failure to offer one—that he had not been offered a permanent position.

He left not only the Institute but the country, returning to the land of his forefathers and rising rapidly to a position of power. After Chen had gone, I learned that the Director of the Institute had shown him my written evaluation of his abilities.

I regretted that breach of etiquette at the time, and I was likely to regret it more in the future. The great French chemist Lavoisier had exposed one of his colleagues, Marat, as a very poor chemist, and he opposed Marat's election to the French Academy of Sciences. Marat had gone on to other forms of work, but he never forgot. Many years later, after the French Revolution, it was Marat's testimony that doomed Lavoisier—"master of charlatans, son of a rent collector, apprentice chemist, secretary to the King."

That was enough to send Lavoisier to the guillotine and roll his head into the basket—a head, in the words of the mathematician Lagrange, that took but a moment to cut off, though a hundred years perhaps would be needed to produce another like it.

I was no Lagrange or Lavoisier. Ironically, Chen's case required that he prove I was.

The second stimscan session was a flop. I wrote nothing useful to either defense or prosecution, although the episode remained crystal clear in my mind when I came out of stim mode. As I told Chen and the assorted legal witnesses, I had been at the conference where Brenda Kaminski and I gave our seminal paper on string amplification. Chen waited until the others had left (except for the guards, who seemed as uninvolved and uncomprehending as furniture). Then he explained to me that only written material would be admitted as evidence. Otherwise, how were the judges to know that I was not inventing history to serve my own purposes?

I said, "You know, don't you, that my contribution to the field modifier

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was very minor. The brain behind the physics of the FiMo was Brenda's, and the engineering was Wolfgang's. Theirs was the act of genius."

"An 'act of genius,' is it, to make a Doomsday Machine that kills thirty million?"

"You know what I mean. Brenda did the hard work—the basic physics. I did the easier part, clothed her ideas in mathematics. Then Wolfgang had a tough time turning the equations to engineering. Surely you know all that, even if it's not in the record."

Chen smiled, and I saw that at least one thing was done less well in the superior world of Chinese liberation. His teeth were uneven, and one canine was decayed and blackened. "Leon," he said, "you may know that, and so may I. But Brenda Kaminski died during the San Francisco invasion, and we have found no trace of Wolfgang Plasky. The theory is that he escaped to Africa. Perhaps you understand me now when I tell you your case will be uphill work."

I said, "You need a scapegoat."

"Don't say 'you.' Say 'they.' I'm on your side. That's why the stimscan could be so valuable. I am not permitted to discuss other evidence against you, but I can tell you it is overwhelming. However, if you ever write something while you're being scanned, a statement that shows how Brenda Kaminski had all the ideas and Wolfgang Plasky turned them to engineering, so they really developed the field modifier without you, you will have a chance."

"I don't think that's true," I said slowly. "I could never have evolved the physical ideas. Those call for a level of intuition that I do not possess. But it's equally true that the transformation of the equations to a coordinate representation was beyond Brenda—she was in no sense a formalist. And without what I did, Wolfgang had nothing to sink his teeth into."

He stared at me with a blank face. "I didn't hear that. Even if I said I did, it would be unsupported and inadmissible." He saw my glance at the guards, and shook his head. "No danger there. They are chosen partly because they speak little or no English, and cannot therefore be persuaded to assist you to suicide. Don't worry about them. Concentrate on the timing of past events, and help me to home in with the stimscans on evidence that supports the idea of Brenda Kaminski and Wolfgang Plasky as the originators of the FiMo."

"I don't know how."

"After each session, pinpoint the date of the memories as accurately as you can. Tell me what happened before and after."

"What about the prosecutors?"

"They'll flounder along after me. They're good lawyers, but they lack my background in mathematics and physics."

His tone was ironic. I said, "Chen, I'm sorry I made that remark about Lavoisier and Marat. It was brainless, and it was unkind."

"And, let us hope, an inappropriate citation of historical precedent." He stood up. "We'll have another session tomorrow. Think positive, Leon. Think innocence. Think acquittal."

Brenda is sitting at the table, her head cocked to one side and her bright bird-eyes staring unblinking at the square of hardboard. It is covered with her messy drawings and my neat equations.

"There's something missing," she says. "Take the special case where you

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leave only one degree of freedom. We ought to recover the normal electromagnetic field. We don't."

I am tired. We have been at work for six hours straight. I know from experience that my stamina runs out about now, and I need a break and a cup of coffee. Brenda is as tireless as usual, and will try to bully me into continuing. This is not work for her. It is the highest form of effortless enjoyment.

I go to the easel and write two lines of algebra in a clear space. "Take your choice," I say. "I can re-cast everything in terms of Plücker coordinates, or we can take a shot using twistors. Take your pick: lines rather than points as the basic coordinates, or elements of the local light cone."

Brenda says, with a speed and certainty that baffles me, "Twistors will be better. Write everything that way."

If her intuition is great enough for her to make that instant decision, why can't she transform the modified field equations for herself? I don't know. But she can't. Whereas for me, the formalism is easy. 'Horses for courses,' as my father used to say. Brenda and I make a good team.

I say, "I think this may go easier if we switch to a spinor formulation, but I won't be sure until I try. I can't do it right now. I have to stop for a few minutes."

"All right." Grudgingly.

She sits, drumming her fingers on the table and staring silently at the easel. I know from experience that she is on her way to some new insight, some new puzzle with which to plague and delight me. Brenda Kaminski thinks in geometrical terms. When I am rested, when my mind is at its absolute clearest and sharpest, I sometimes catch a glimpse of the world as she must see it.

I walk over to the coffee urn, aware that this is the happiest time of my life. And, suddenly and harshly, we are interrupted.

Julian Birdsall's head pokes in the open door. "Leon, you have a call."

"Tell them I'll get back to them later." I want a break, but not to talk on the telephone.

"I don't think that would work." His tone is apologetic. "It's your mother. Your father has had a stroke. It sounds bad."

I follow him out without a word to or from Brenda. All my life my father has broken into my thoughts. He is doing it still.

"Closing in on it," Chen said. "But you had us running around like headless chickens finding something for you to write on. We never anticipated this. I suppose we should have. You were working at a blackboard?"

"An easel." The sheets of paper on the table in front of me had been replaced by great squares of cardboard. My equations, carefully labeled with date and time, were being collected by Chen's colleagues.

"Next time we will be better prepared." He nodded toward the pile of cardboard sheets. "This does not help our case. You have a way to go, but you are evolving the basic equations underlying the FiMo."

"You only see my side of it. Brenda Kaminski was doing the real thinking. All I did was tidy her thoughts and put her diagrams into equations."

"I understand the difference, but most people—including your judges—wouldn't. There's one bit of good news for you, though. A DNA smear from a store robbery in Wyoming matches Wolfgang Plasky. It looks like he didn't escape to Africa. He's in hiding in this country."

Chen's tone was one of satisfaction, but I was less sure of his feelings.

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Twenty-five years ago I had seen him congratulate a colleague on her receipt of a Fields medal, and his expression then had hinted at a deep-seated envy. Maybe I was imagining things, but I could read on his face now that same tight-lipped look.

On the other hand, I didn't think the presence or absence of Wolfgang Plasky at my trial would make the slightest difference. Wolfgang was enormously egotistical, convinced that everyone else in the world was at best marginally competent, but I didn't see how that could help me. With Wolfgang present, two people rather than one would be shot; or hanged, impaled, starved to death, burned at the stake or subjected to the field modifier—I wasn't sure what form of execution, old or new, fast or slow, humane or savage, was preferred by the enlightened rulers of the Liberation force.

The odd thing was that part of me agreed with my accusers. I had seen videos of the FiMo in action. The invading army came over the brow of a hill as a great swarm of tanks and artillery and heavily armed infantry. Then the FiMo was activated and aimed. Everything above ground level melted and crumbled, men and machines and vegetation. In ten minutes the contours of the landscape were coated with a thick layer of gray dust, as smooth and uniform as a stretched rubber sheet. There was nothing to capture, no one to bury.

Surely the monsters who developed and used such a weapon on living creatures deserved to die.

My mother is distraught. I am impatient, sitting outside the French doors that face onto the back garden and trying without success to reformulate the field modifier equations. I cannot concentrate.

My father, the cause of my mother's weariness and my irritation, lies inside. I rushed here as soon as I received the call, dropping everything when I heard that he was dying. Upon my arrival I felt sure that mother had been right to tell me to hurry. His skin color was bad, tinged with an odd grayish-blue that was most pronounced around his mouth. He had always been a vigorous man, short in stature but barrel-chested and bursting with energy, yet although he knew me when I arrived at his bedside and took his hand, his grip was tentative and feeble. And cold. I sat with him all that first night, convinced that death was imminent.

Since then he seemed both better and worse. I had always imagined that a stroke would show in some particular part of the body, an arm or a leg paralyzed and useless. He had no such symptoms. Upon request, he could move any part of him. He did have trouble speaking, but the slurring of his words was due in part to his poorly fitting dental bridge, which slipped forward in his mouth on any word containing a "sh" sound. The result was more ludicrous than frightening, especially since he laughed each time it happened. In fact, the change in his manner was perhaps the clearest evidence of major changes within his brain. He had always been an insensitive and demanding man. Now, demanding still, his disposition seemed positively sunny.

Mother had been unable to relax since the chilling moment when my father, sitting watching television in the living room, began to speak gibberish to her while giving the clear impression that what he said made perfect sense. She stayed awake the whole next thirty-six hours, frightened, waiting. Upon my arrival, I insisted on taking over the night-time vigil.

I expected father to live for a day, perhaps at most two. On this bright, clear morning, I have been here for ten long days and nine even longer

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nights. I am seriously sleep-deprived. I know what I am trying to do on the pad on my lap—calculate the explicit form of a set of eigenspinors that will allow the transformation of the field modifier equations—but each line of algebra that I write seems oddly disconnected from the last. I am lacking not in brains, but in the will to carry through what I sense to be possible.

Sitting in the shade of the great flowering lilac, I am sure that I am on the brink of some profound event. Death, or transformation? It sounds like a religious question. It also recalls the title of a tone poem by Richard Strauss. I smile to myself at the odd connection, giddy with fatigue in the morning sunlight. As I am writing another line, my father's voice calls through the open French doors. Calls for me, and then immediately calls again for my mother.

I stand up. Peace and pleasure are blotted out by impatience and an irritation that feels like hatred.

Wasn't it Charles the Second who apologized that he took an unconscionable time a-dying?

Chen made no secret of his strategy. He could not, since every stimscan session had to be approved by both defense and prosecution.

We were homing in on the time which he believed would provide key evidence for one side or the other: the hours or days in which the field modifier equations were written in the form that permitted engineering design. Chen wanted to know who had been present, who had done what, at that seminal development.

Curiously enough, so did I. I told him that I had no memory of that critical event.

He blinked at me. In the thin light of the single bulb, high in the cement-block wall, his face was tense and mournful. Since the day of my own capture, the world outside had ceased to exist. Now I wondered, for the first time in weeks, what was happening. Was the conquest of North America complete? Or were the Chinese still meeting pockets of resistance, mountain men using well-equipped personal arsenals to fight back, rejoicing in combat, triumphant that their insistence on the right to bear arms had been vindicated? Ironically, many of the newer fighters were Chinese-American, more opposed to their "liberation" than any other group.

Chen said, "It is difficult for me to believe that you do not recall an event so important in your life."

It was as close as he would come to a statement that I was lying.

I did not answer the implied question. I was not lying. The results of the last stimscan session were as baffling to me as to Chen Xiao. I knew that the final equations had been presented at a seminar less than three weeks after I sat exhausted under the lilac in my parents' garden, on that warm morning of late spring. But what I had written while being stimscanned for those hours was far from complete. Worse than that. Looking at my efforts again, I read them as disjointed algebraic babbling.

When and how was the key development created?

I could not remember, not if my life depended on it. Maybe it did. But I had to defer consideration of the question, because Chen said, "This morning there will be a summary presentation of the evidence against you. I tried to postpone this until the stimscans were complete, but I failed. You have the right to be present as an observer—if you wish."

He raised his eyebrows at me in a thoroughly western gesture, while I wondered what he was getting out of all this. Why would a lawyer, success-

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ful in his own country long before the Liberation, elect to defend a man so obviously doomed?

"I want to be there," I said. "Don't I?"

"I think so. Though I must warn you, it will not be a pleasant experience. Today belongs to the prosecutors."

He motioned to the guards standing silently by the wall. I stood up, and was escorted out of my little room.

My interest in and talent for numbers pre-dates my earliest memories. I had, quite unconsciously, kept a count of the days since my capture. As we walked along a drab cement-walled corridor, through a narrow doorway, across a thickly carpeted anteroom, and finally into an open and sun-filled chamber, I thought to myself: fifty-six days. This was my first glance at the outside world in fifty-six days.

It was that external world, more than the gray-clad three men and two women at the central dais, or the cluster of frowning advocates in the well of the chamber, or the scores of uniformed guards who ringed the octagonal walls, that grabbed my attention.

I had been captured as Leon, the world's worst boy scout, tried to snake through a wintry wood that offered no hiding-place or cover from my pursuers. I had been brought to this prison before the first buds opened. While I was locked away with my stimscan sessions, spring had come and gone. Beyond the high windows of the hearing room I saw lush, full green. The sun striking in through the high window was unbelievably bright. My eyes, after so long in dim artificial light, were dazzled, and I stood on the threshold of the room stunned by the strength of high summer.

"Keep moving," Chen said softly from behind me. "There are seats for us near the bench. Let me warn you: speech, or any form of reaction to what you hear and see, will lead to your removal from the court. You are permitted to be present as an observer, not as a participant. I will serve as your interpreter, but it must be a one-way communication. Save your questions, whatever they are, and I will answer them after we leave."

His warning seemed unnecessary; on the other hand, I had not heard the evidence.

The preliminary fifteen minutes consisted of discussions between the five judges and the prosecutors. It was conducted entirely in Chinese and unintelligible to me. Chen made no attempt to provide a translation, until suddenly every person except one sat down and Chen said, "They've finished the preliminaries. Now for the principal accusations against you. This will be important."

Important or not, the man spoke in long low-voiced sentences that showed no trace of passion. Chen offered jerky, terse translations. "Contrast between Americans and their Chinese liberators. Inhumane versus humane weapons of war. Causing death versus preventing it."

"But we—" I began.

He held up a hand in warning. The speaker was glancing in my direction, and one of the guards was already starting forward. I leaned back in my seat and placed my hands over my mouth as a symbol of submissive behavior.

Chen's continuing summary confirmed what before I had only heard rumored. As the liberation army advanced, the American government had employed the ultimate deterrent: nuclear tactical weapons in the field, together with hydrogen bombs targeted at cities of the Chinese mainland. Not

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one worked. The Chinese had their own secret weapon, a projected field that interfered with the radioactive decay process. (Hearing that news as a group of us from the Institute scampered east across Nevada like scared rabbits, my first thought was that a scientific genius of the first magnitude was at work in China and I would never have a chance to learn who it was.)

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the Chinese inhibitor device did not work against our FiMo. The American army had slaughtered the advancing Chinese forces in their millions, along with every plant and animal unlucky enough to share the same patches of ground. Broad swaths of Washington, Oregon, and California were now tracts of blown dust, awaiting their ultimate re-seeding by easterly winds and rains.

The Chinese speaker swiveled and pointed toward me for the first time.

"Evil genius—principal architect of that terrible weapon," Chen translated. "Sitting—well-fed and self-satisfied—showing no contrition—while the thirty million heroic Chinese whom he killed lack even the dignity of separate graves." And then, in a different voice, "He is not permitted such an unproven statement."

Suddenly he was on his feet, making his own speech in Chinese. Whether his words were accepted or not by the panel of judges I could not tell, because an argument at once broke out and I was led out of the chamber and taken to my own cell. The guards performed their usual thorough search for anything that might possibly enable me to commit suicide, then left.

For three hours I was left with my thoughts. "Principal architect" of the field modifier? An "evil genius"? I had never seen it that way. Also, I did not believe that a case based on such an assumption could succeed. I was the least element of the triumvirate, no more than a buffer zone between the powerful minds and egos of Brenda Kaminski and Wolfgang Plasky. Blame or credit for the FiMo belonged to them, not me.

One thing conflicted with that idea. I, a mathematician of some repute and a man with a supposedly powerful memory, could not recall the critical sequence of events that produced the field equations.

It has turned into a regular routine. Mother checks my father's condition and says good night, then at my insistence she retires to the front bedroom. That was my room before I went away to college. It has been kept just as it was when I left, which for some reason makes me uncomfortable. My father is in the main bedroom, toward the rear of the house and out of mother's easy earshot. It has twin beds. I spend the nights in the one nearer the door.

My father is suffering a good deal of inexplicable head pain, and at nine-thirty my mother gives him his one-a-day painkiller and also a sleeping pill—his "sleeper," as he calls it. As usual, the latter does not work at once. I sit on the bed end and wait. He talks to me. He is somewhat incoherent, but it is a dull and oft-told tale, of how he should never have retired from work when he did, it was work that kept him healthy and kept him going, his successor didn't understand engines and would never do half the job that he had done.

In the room's semi-darkness, with its sweet yet unpleasant smell of sickness, I grunt occasionally to show that I am listening. I am not. I am hearing, *but my father has never in his life said anything worth listening to. A pad of paper is by my side, and I yearn to begin work. A couple of hours ago I had a new idea for a way to calculate the eigenspinors explicitly. If I am right, the equations describing the field modification will become radically*

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simpler. I can even see a way to transform the original nonlinear system into a linear equivalent, with a set of exact solutions. Brenda Kaminski thinks that is impossible.

My mind tonight feels unusually focused, as though continued lack of sleep has left me able to concentrate on one thing and one thing only. My father's mumbling is an intolerable and continuing distraction. I grit my teeth and wait, until finally he begins to snore. I sneak out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. It is almost eleven o'clock. I should have five good hours of work before he has to be helped to the bathroom.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking me. Surely I didn't fall asleep at the table, at the very moment when I was poised for a great achievement.

I looked up. It was Chen, leaning over me. The intent faces were those of my prosecutors—my persecutors.

"Nothing," Chen said. "I felt sure that this time we were at the critical point. But you wrote not a word."

"Send me back."

"Tomorrow—"

"No. At once." I could not communicate the urgency that I felt.

He looked at me dubiously. "The conventions for prisoner treatment, they provide only for one session per day."

"This is different. I am *requesting* the additional session. You are not trying to force it on me."

"Wait a moment. I will have to consult the prosecutors, and the other defenders."

I sat and waited. I was in agony. Ridiculously, I felt that events back in my parents' house were proceeding without me. I was missing the most important hours of my life—hours of which I presently had no memory.

"Very well." Chen walked back to where I sat rigid in my chair. "The headset, then, and the I/V. . . ."

I was right. The transformations shape themselves like magic. They come from somewhere beyond me. All I have to do is write them out. There is one final stage yet to come, a tricky inversion that will call for every last scrap of my intellect and analytical power.

The interruption is a scratch of nails on a blackboard, a speck of blown dust in the eye. "Mary? Mary!"

He is calling for my mother, who is at the front of the house and cannot hear him. I shiver, stand up, and walk through to the bedroom. My mind is ablaze with ideas—with inspiration, with a fire of impatience. My watch says twelve-thirty.

"My head's killing me." A weak voice in the darkness. "I can't sleep. Have I had my sleeper?"

"No." A second one will do him no harm. I find the bottle of pills, bring water, help him to sit up. "Here. Take two. And a couple of painkillers. They will help."

He nods, swallows with difficulty, lies back down. I wait for five minutes, then steal away to the lighted kitchen. I feel that I am back at work only a few minutes when, incredibly, the voice comes again. "Mary? Mary?"

I want to ignore him, but I cannot. I glance at my watch. One-ten already, and the precious mood of inspiration is in danger of slipping away. I go through to the bedroom sick with impatience.

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"What's the matter now?"

"Leon? I've been dreaming. My head hurts. I still can't sleep."

"I'll get you something."

I take two sleeping pills and two painkillers from their bottles, then after a moment add another two of each. He gulps, grunting but not questioning as each one goes down. Then he says, "Sit with me, Leon."

"I will. I just have to bring something from the kitchen. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Come and sit with me."

"I will. I'll be right back."

I go to the door and wait just outside it. In less than five minutes his breathing settles to a harsh, regular rasp, deep in his throat. At last. I hurry back to the kitchen, back to immortality. I know that I am creating something for the ages.

Time no longer exists. Here are the eigenspinors, here come the transformed field equations. Their new form is revealing. I see to the heart of them and catch an interpretation that even Brenda Kaminski has never dreamed of. At this moment I am in possession of a physical law that no one else has ever known.

"Leon? Leon!"

My mother's voice, shrill and urgent. It is light outside, dawn breaking though the kitchen window. I lay down my pen, not sure for a moment where I am. Stiff and dizzy, I hobble through to my parents' bedroom.

Mother is stooped over the rumpled bed. He lies on it, head turned toward me, jaw slack and mouth agape. I look, at him, at the pill bottles on the bedside table, at my mother's uncomprehending stare. I recall the glory of the field equations; and I know the trade-off I have made.

It is easy to forget the stimscan limitations. I emerge, convinced that Chen knows everything that I now know. He is aware that my role in the development of the field modifier was greater than I have admitted. I am doomed.

Deservedly doomed. My memories are no longer screened from me. I recall my mother's distress, the doctor's visit, the perfunctory examination and the single question: "Was he complaining of headaches?"

"Yes."

He nods and writes, *Cause of death: cerebral thrombosis.*

But Chen Xiao, as I realize when my frozen brain starts to work again, knows only what I have written. He is looking at those sheets of equations, and on his face I see a glow of triumph.

"You got what you wanted, didn't you?" I say. "Without those pages, I had a chance. Not much of one, but too much for you to risk."

He stares down at me. I expect a denial or possibly no reply at all. At least a few of the prosecutors and defenders in the room understand some English, and I feel sure everything is recorded. But the moment is too pleasing for him to let it pass completely. He says, "Revenge is a dish best eaten cold. Lavoisier and Marat. As you remarked, it is an interesting historical parallel."

He hands to an assistant the sheets on which I wrote the transformed field equations. I think he might say more, but another blue-clad lawyer hurries into the room. There is a brief exchange in Chinese, then all the lawyers leave in a group. Naturally, no one tells me what is happening. I

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am left strapped in the stimscan chair, in the company of my thoughts and the silent guards.

I try to look at my watch, and of course I am not wearing one. My head is hopelessly confused between present reality and stimscan memory. Finally, after a period of introspection on my past and probable future that I estimate to last at least two hours, Chen re-enters the room. He carries a cardboard box under his arm. A gesture and a single phrase dismiss the guards. He sits down and stares at me without speaking.

"What has happened?" I am not a perceptive person when it comes to human emotions, but his face is hardly that of a man achieving some long-sought goal.

I do not expect an answer, and certainly not the one that I get. He places the cardboard box on his lap and taps the lid. "This is a copy of records kept by your colleague Wolfgang Plasky. Tell me, is he a conceited man?"

"He's an egomaniac."

"Ah." A long silence, then, "Plasky was captured yesterday during a routine road-check at the Wyoming-Nebraska border. The amazing thing—I didn't believe it until I saw copies—is that he was carrying with him records of the FiMo prototype development. With photographs. Wolfgang Plasky is in most of the pictures, Brenda Kaminski in a few. Leon Hinsley is in none."

"I've hated having my picture taken ever since I was small."

"Lucky for you—or was it inspired foresight? There is more. Wolfgang Plasky is not ashamed of his work. He is proud of it. After his capture he made a statement in which he asserted that the field modifier was his idea, and his alone. No one else played more than a minor part."

"That's nonsense. Without Brenda Kaminski's insights there would be no theory of field modification."

"And without Leon Hinsley's mathematical talents, that theory would not exist in a form permitting engineering design. I know, I know." Chen taps the cardboard box. "But Wolfgang Plasky swears otherwise. Brenda Kaminski is dead. The defenders will ask the judges, why would Wolfgang Plasky sign his death warrant?"

"I thought *you* were my defender."

He makes a small and dismissive hand gesture. "For twenty-five years I have thought Leon Hinsley the luckiest man alive. At the Institute you were always in the right place at the right time, ready to apply some mathematical trick to a new idea and grab part of the credit. I see that your luck still holds." Once more he taps the box on his lap. "This will probably be your salvation. Our leaders are eager to demonstrate their superior compassion to the rest of the world. Wolfgang Plasky seems more than ready to serve as a symbolic sacrifice."

He stands up and comes close. His fingers twitch, as though he would like to reach out and strangle me as I sit strapped in the chair. But the guards are outside. If they will not allow suicide they are unlikely to permit murder.

He steps back. "I will do what I can with the evidence of the stimscans, but I doubt it will be sufficient. Many judges are suspicious of its reliability. You will not get what you deserve. I think that you will live. You may even be acquitted."

He leaves. Lucky Leon Hinsley is left alone with his thoughts.

I decide that I agree with Chen. I will probably escape the death sentence. The life sentence is another and more serious matter. O

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Michael Swanwick

MOON DOGS

Michael Swanwick's "The Very Pulse of the Machine" (*Asimov's*, February 1998) recently won a Hugo award for best short story. In his latest tale, he takes us along to watch the eerie dance of the hunter and the hunted.

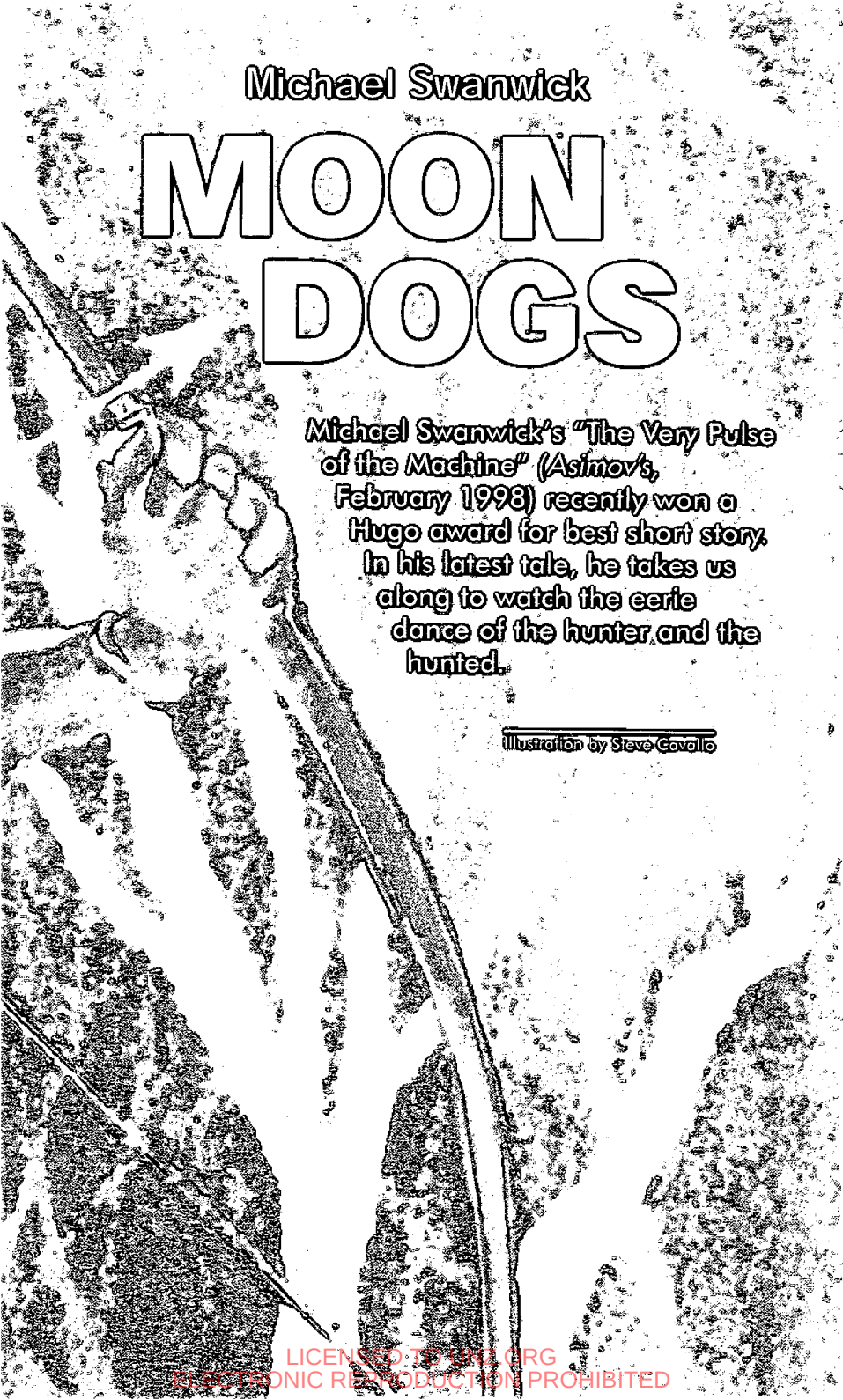

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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He went to a spa where, for a fee, they would drown you as often as you liked. You wouldn't actually die, because they put a shunt in your skull and kept the brain oxygenated, but your body didn't know that and your survival reflexes would kick in so that you'd choke and gag and fight for oxygen as you experienced the desperation of approaching death. You could thrash and struggle for hours. The water was ice-cold and as dark as tea. If you panicked and did too much damage to your body, there was a clinic nearby where you could rest while solicitous friends in white coats cured it.

After they had emptied his lungs, removed the shunt, and switched on a small fire, the counselors gave Nick a blanket and withdrew, leaving him alone in the woods to contemplate the experience in peace.

Shivering, Nick drew the blanket around him. He didn't feel any better than he had before. He hadn't experienced any kind of release at all. His mood was as bleak as ever. Life still felt hopeless.

A while later, he put on the clothing they had left him, folded up the blanket, switched off the fire, and stood. The night was quiet and dark, lit only by a low moon. There was a path over the hill that led to the lodge. He heard two of the staff laughing quietly over something one had said, just before their propane torches disappeared. But he didn't feel like going back to the lodge and their hired warmth and camaraderie. Not just yet.

Instead, he put the moon to his back and went the other direction, deeper into the woods, and was quickly lost. He did not care. The woods were tangled and random, a jumble of tree trunks and deadfall, some lying broken on the ground, others propped up by other trees. There was no pattern in them, he reflected, nothing to fix the eye upon. It seemed a perfect metaphor for everything.

It was then he saw the sycamores, pale in the moonlight.

The sycamores formed a ghostly ring around an empty darkness. They looked like a Druidic temple. He thought at first that they were former ornamentals—this had been a populous suburb not a century ago—marking the perimeter of a house long fallen to ruin. But then he saw how the ground within sank downward and realized that the bowl-shaped depression they marked was carved by the same small stream that had fed his drowning pool. At its center would be another ceremonial pool, perhaps, or else a minuscule swamp.

He walked closer and as he did so a pale white flame resolved itself into existence at the center of the darkness. He squinted, unsure as to its reality, and continued walking. Then he saw the white shape stoop, and heard a splash of water.

"Hello?" he said.

The shape flinched, turned, and in a woman's voice said, "Who are you?"

"My name's Nick. Do you want me to go away?"

"No, I'm about done here. You can dry me off."

Nick walked to the edge of the water. The woman stood knee-deep within it. In the gloom she was hard to see. Her crotch was filled with shadow; her navel was the merest smudge. He couldn't make out her mouth or nose at all. Twin falls of long, dark hair framed eyes that mirrored the black water in which she stood.

"The towel's by your feet."

He was reaching for the towel when something came bounding out of obscurity. It was a gundog, long and as elegantly constructed as antique Swiss

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clockwork. "Touch the lady and you're a dead man," it growled. There was a clicking noise from its abdomen.

"Stand down your armaments, Otto. He's not threatening me."

With a mechanical whine the gundog sat. There were other machines in the woods, gray shadows that prowled and circled without rest. Nick tried to count them. Three, six—too many to count.

The woman stood before Nick and turned her back. "Well?"

Carefully he dried her off, starting with her hair and shoulders, moving down her back and over her rump. Her body had the sculptural perfection of a Brancusi marble. He crouched to dry the back of her legs, and when he reached the ankles, she turned around to face him. She was so close he could smell her: fresh and clean, with accents of oak-leaf and cedar.

She took the towel and did her front, then squatted and let Otto blow hot air on her.

When she was dry, the woman dressed in jeans and a shirt. She wrapped her hair up in the towel, like a turban, and said, "My house is just over the hill. Cocoa?"

"Why not?"

The kitchen was bright and clean. They sat at the table and talked. Her name, she said, was Selene. The gundogs came and went, patrolling the grounds, occasionally lying silent at her feet. Their metal nails clicked softly on the floor.

"Why do you want to die?" Selene asked, when they'd been talking a while.

"I don't *want* to die—it's something I'm trying to purge from my subconscious. But when you've seen your parents die, and your brothers die, and your sister die, and nine-tenths of the kids in the first orphanage die, and half of those in the second . . . well. There's bound to be a certain amount of survivor guilt."

She studied his face. "No," she said at last, "it's not that."

"Then I don't know what it is."

"No. You don't."

"And you do?"

"I didn't say that. But if I had your problem, I would at least know what it was. I'll bet you live in one of the new city-cores. Neon, noise, smoky little bars. Everybody crammed as close together as they can get."

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's evasion. You want to understand yourself, you've got to experience a little isolation. Go off alone by yourself. In the winter, sometimes I go for weeks without seeing another human being."

"What exactly do you do out here?"

"I hunt. That's what the 'dogs are for. I have a little money and so I hunt. Deer mostly. But I bagged a puma not long back."

"It hardly seems fair. All that machinery against one little deer."

Her look was unfathomable. "There's the couch. Get some sleep. I'll wake you in the morning and take you out with me. You'll see then."

The woods were misty and indistinct. Selene led him out into them, her hounds flowing about her like a river of quicksilver. She wore a Teflon jacket over her plaid shirt, and she carried a hunting knife on her belt. Amber goggles hung from a cord around her neck.

"Okay," Nick said. "So how is this thing done?"

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"First we deploy the 'dogs." Selene swept out an arm and half the pack scattered into the surrounding woods. The remaining six stayed with her, alert and tireless. The sound of the machines thrashing through the undergrowth died away to nothing surprisingly quickly.

"What do we do now?"

"Enjoy the woods." She drew in a deep breath, let it out. "Smell those pines! The 'dogs will let us know when they've flushed something worthwhile."

"I think . . ."

"Don't. Don't think, don't talk, just walk. And listen. Try to appreciate how lucky you are to be here at all."

Hunting, it seemed, consisted largely of walking. Selene moved unhurriedly, picking easy ways, going always deeper into the woods. Occasionally one of the 'dogs barked once or twice in the distance. "Just letting me know where they are," she said when Nick asked. "Now, hush."

Sometimes she strolled casually, heedlessly along. Other times she would tense, listening, watching, every nerve strained. Nick couldn't figure out the rhythms. Following in her wake, he stared at her long, long legs, her broad shoulders and fine back, her perfect ass. She was an Amazon. He couldn't figure her out. He couldn't help wanting her.

At noon they sent one of the 'dogs back to the house for sandwiches and a thermos of herbal tea. They ate sitting on a crumbled foundation wall, halfway up a mountain. One of the gundogs crouched at Selene's feet, staring out over the forest.

The trees went on forever. "Everything, far as the eye can see, used to be city. No place you've ever heard of either, just an endless sprawl of no-name tract housing, malls, petty manufacturing, sewage treatment plants. And now—"

"Turn off your 'dogs," Nick said.

"What?"

"Let's be alone, you and I. Turn off the 'dogs."

"No."

He picked up a stick, scraped a line in the dirt. "What are you afraid of?"

She looked at him again. Those unfathomable green eyes. "My husband."

"You have a husband?"

"It's a complicated story."

"Tell me."

For a long moment she was silent, gathering her thoughts. Then she said, "You and I are alike in some ways. We're both orphans. Only my family didn't die of cholera or malaria or typhoid fever. They were killed by Sacred Vaccine."

"I don't—"

"It was a religious cult. There were dozens just like it. They thought the human race was facing extinction. So they decided to fight back against the microbes with human sacrifice. Does that make any sense to you?"

"Well, in a way, yeah. You're afraid, so you take control by becoming what you fear."

"My family was lucky—three kids, all healthy. My parents took us out into the country, to isolate us from what was going on. They had enough money to do that."

Nick nodded. He knew the type well enough. She was a plague heiress—one of those who stood at the confluence where several streams of inheritance ran together. She'd probably never had to work in her life.

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"One day there was a knock on the door. It was our neighbors. They killed everyone but me. I was the youngest. They smeared their sacred sign on my forehead with blood and then married me to one of their members. Then they let me go. I was only five years old. Joshua—my husband—was seven."

"I'm sorry," Nick said.

"I'm not looking for your sympathy. I've had time enough to work things through. The bad times are over. I like my life. Only . . . my parents were pacifists. I'm not." She balled a fist and rapped him on the chest with it, just a little too hard. "Keep that in mind."

"So this Joshua—he's been bothering you?"

"He—"

A sudden baying rose up in the distance. Selene shot to her feet, listening. The baying was answered by a second, a third, until all the dogs were howling.

Selene quickly donned her goggles. "Isn't that a lovely sound?"

"Yes." It was.

"It's a recording. The breed that bayed like that died out during the plague decades. Lost, like so many things that lacked the people to keep them going." She scanned the horizon, matching mountains to her goggles' mapping graphics. Then she pointed. "That way. That's where they'll drive him. Come on—run!"

"Down this way!"

Selene had tied her jacket around her waist. It made a tail that leaped like a flag as she bounded down the slope of the ravine. Nick followed clumsily.

At the bottom, she showed him where to stand, between two trees. "The 'dogs will run him right past you. Be careful not to get in his way! Those antlers are sharp. The hooves can do real damage. Over here, the lead will present to him. He'll shy and rear. That leaves his throat vulnerable. I'll be aiming for his carotid artery." She showed him where it was on her own throat.

"Is that all you're using? That knife?"

"When I'm running 'dogs, yes. Otherwise, I use a bow."

Nick barely had time to catch his breath when the woods erupted with baying 'dogs. Something large crashed noisily through the brush, coming straight toward him. Then the stag burst from the bushes, wild-eyed and enormous. The 'dogs were baying and snapping at its flank.

He stepped back automatically. The hunt swept right past him. Selene laughed, and stepped in its path.

She was magnificent.

A 'dog slipped around front of the stag and, bracing its legs, cried a challenge. As predicted, the beast reared back.

Selene leaped at the animal, seizing its antlers. One hand went to her belt. The other pulled back, so that the stag's long neck arched. The gundogs were snarling and leaping. Her hunting knife slashed and slashed again.

Blood sprayed everywhere. Warm flecks of it spattered his shirt and stung his face.

When the stag died, the gundogs all fell silent at once. It was eerie. Selene stepped backed from the beast, taking a deep breath. "Look at that—a six-pointer."

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"Yeah."

"Are you all right?" she asked. "You're trembling."

I think I'm in love, he wanted to say. And, no, it's not all right, it's not all right at all. But instead, "No, really. I'm fine."

Selene laughed. "It's always like that—your first time."

Selene gutted the beast, then slung it over her shoulders. When Nick offered to help, she laughed at him.

Back home, she hung up the carcass to cure on a frame behind the house. "Come on inside," she said, "and we'll get cleaned up."

When Selene came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair, she wore a baby-blue bathrobe, loosely cinched. Just looking at how her body moved within it made him hard.

"Well," Nick said. "I guess it's my turn at the tub."

She looked at him steadily, wordlessly. Without warning, she hooked an ankle behind him and gave him a two-handed shove. He fell back onto the couch.

Then she was on top of him, pushing up his shirt, tugging at his belt, shoving his trousers down to his knees. Before he knew what was going on, she had him inside of her and was humping him, humping him, humping him.

It was almost rape. He wasn't at all sure he liked it at first. Then he was, and wanted it to last forever. And then it was over.

Then she took him into the bedroom and they made love again. More slowly this time.

"Don't expect much," she said afterward. "I don't like entanglements."

"Entanglements?"

"Men, then. I don't much like men."

"Do you want me to leave?" Nick asked.

"Oh, stay till morning. I'll make you breakfast." She rolled over and went to sleep.

The 'dogs padded quietly, alertly, in and out of the room, on constant patrol.

Nick got up in the middle of the night. Selene was still asleep. Moonlight flooded the room.

Silently, he put his clothes on.

The central command unit for the gundogs emitted a hum in the 330-hertz range. He was sensitive to things like that. He used the sound to find the unit, disguised as a lingerie chest, and flicked the kill switch, deactivating everything. The hum died.

She had never bothered to ask him what he did for a living. This was what he did. He sold and installed security systems.

He picked up her hunting knife.

There was a slight rustling noise. He turned and saw Selene looking at him.

Quietly, she asked, "Is there something wrong?"

Nick could feel her fear. He wanted to put down the knife and reassure her. Instead, he said, "Get out of bed."

Selene pushed the covers aside and stood, naked and vulnerable. She knew who he was now. "Joshua . . ."

"It's Nick now. I changed my name when I was released. I wanted to put the past behind me."

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"Nick. The plagues are over."

"That's what I used to think. But diseases mutate. They can adapt too fast for man's technology to keep up with." He found that talking gave him confidence. He felt that he was on the right track at last. "That's what brought on the great die-back: arrogance, pride, and broad-spectrum antibiotics. For a century, every disease was fought back to insignificance with drugs so widely prescribed that people thought epidemics weren't *supposed* to happen. Then the diseases adapted, resisted, and returned.

"Now you think that because we've suppressed the germs and viruses again, we've got the evil under control. But it's only come back with another name. Look at you! You're infected with the great dark thing called *fear*. You're so rotten with it you're shaking. My family was right. It never goes away. You can hide out here in the woods, you can surround yourself with gundogs. But it knows where you live. It knows when you're helpless. Sooner or later, it comes for you." Nick gestured with the knife. "Let's go outside."

He walked her out to where the deer carcass hung curing. The ground beneath it was dark with blood. "That's far enough. Stay there, with your back to me."

She obeyed. This was what fear did to you. She was stronger than he was, and faster too. But she obeyed.

"I suppose you're going to kill me." Her voice almost broke on the penultimate word, but otherwise betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

"No." Nick drew in a long breath, exhaled. "I'm going to kill myself. I thought you'd want to see it."

Astonished, she spun around. He had the knife to his throat by then. The carotid artery. He'd seen how well that worked.

"They said I was cured, and released me. I got a job. I even had a girlfriend for a while. But then I started sending you those letters. The disease had returned." The knife tickled his throat unpleasantly. "I've been thinking about this for a long time."

"Why involve *me*? What are you doing *here*, goddammit?"

"It took me years to understand what my parents were trying to do. It's called the ceremony of triage: Inoculate the healthy. Leave the dying to their fate. Shoot the infected. Okay, it's loony. If you think of it as a way of minimizing pain, it makes a lot of—"

"Pain! What do you know about pain?" She splayed her hands across the flesh under her ribs and twisted around so he could see the scar between them. It was puckered and deep. Somehow, he hadn't noticed it when they'd screwed. "I was gored by a buck. He shoved his fucking antler right through me. Do you have any idea how much that hurt?"

"You—"

"It hurt a *lot*. I almost died then. I was lucky to make it back to the road. I was lucky that somebody came along in a car. I was lucky he stopped. I was so god-damned lucky I had no business complaining when it got infected and almost killed me a second time. But I did. Because—you know what?—it hurt like hell. And you've got the nerve to talk about pain!"

Nick didn't know what to say.

"When I got out of the hospital, I was afraid to hunt. The pain had been that bad. Afraid to hunt! So you know what I did?"

He shook his head.

"I went out and tracked down that exact same buck, and I killed it. I was terrified, but I faced up to my fear. I faced up to it, and I conquered it."

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She was ablaze with anger. "You've got a problem. You're afraid. Well, join the club! *I* didn't give in to my fear. *I* faced it down. Why can't you?"

Nick took the knife down from his throat. He looked down at it, heavy and useless in his hand, for a long moment. Then he tossed it away, into darkness.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "I'll leave now."

On the road from the house, Nick felt a strange sensation seize him. He had no name for it. But, though the woods were dark and silent about him, they didn't oppress him.

A sense of futility still clung to him, and he knew he had a long way to go. But suddenly he knew what that nameless thing was called.

Hope.

The lights came on behind him. He heard the whine of gundogs powering up, and then the frantic sound of the machines running for their appointed guardposts.

He thought how easily the devices could tear him apart. They'd do that on command. But he didn't look back. He wouldn't give in to the fear.

Never again.

Nick took a deep breath, and for the first time in his life felt free. He wanted to laugh and caper. He wanted to turn right around and make love with Selene again. The night was no longer threatening, but dark and filled with promise.

Selene was right! He could face down his fears. Someday he might even master them.

Metal paws sped through the night. A gundog sped past and, wheeling, sat waiting for him in the road.

It was Otto; he knew by the markings. The 'dog opened his mouth. What emerged was not the gruff mechanical voice Nick expected, but Selene's clear, calm soprano.

"Turn around, Nick."

He turned.

Selene stood in the yard before her house. In the light that spilled from the windows, her face was white as bone, her eye sockets black as ink. She'd thrown on a blouse, but hadn't bothered to button it. He could see pale flesh all the way from her neck to her crotch.

She held a bow in her hand.

Shadows swarmed about her feet—gundogs, eager for her command.

"Selene—"

"You can't give in to what you fear," she said. "You have to face it down. And kill it."

There was a strange noise, like cloth tearing, and an arrow appeared in the dirt at his feet.

"I'll give you a head start. If you start running now, you just might make it back to the spa."

She nocked another arrow into her bow.

Nick took a step, another, found himself running. The road was flat and empty before him. He turned, and plunged into the brush at its side. Twigs slashed his face and grabbed at his clothes. He paid them no mind. He thought only of escape.

Behind him, one by one, the 'dogs began to bay. ❍

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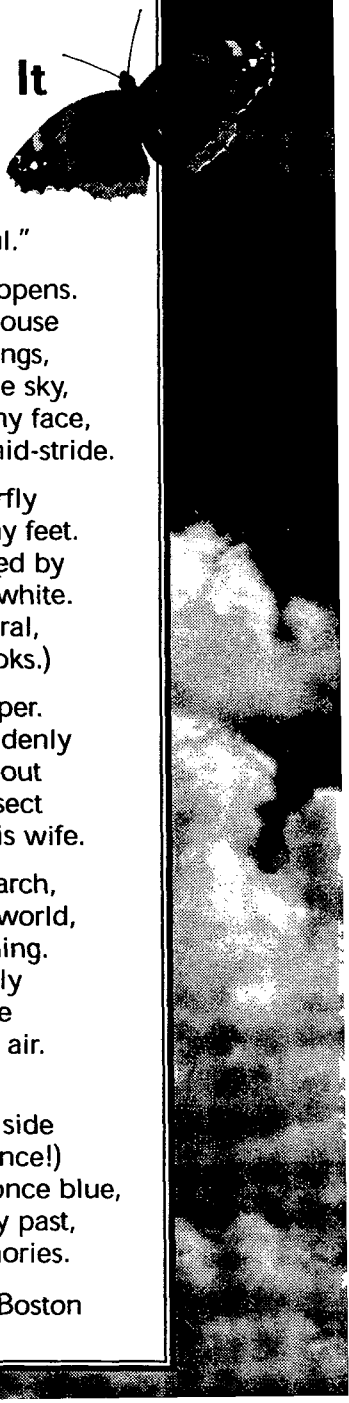
My Wife Returns As She Would Have It

for Maureen



"I'd come back as a butterfly,"
she often told me, "a Monarch
or something equally as beautiful."

Eleven days after her death it happens.
I am walking a block from our house
when a quick flutter of velvet wings,
dark against the pale dome of the sky,
passes left to right inches from my face,
causing me to pull up short in mid-stride.

Turning to the right I see a butterfly
has landed on the sidewalk at my feet.
Black and brown shadings striated by
vermilion bands, speckled with white.
(Not a Monarch but a Red Admiral,
I later discover in one of her books.)

"Is that you, sweetheart?" I whisper.
I am a fifty-six-year-old man suddenly
kneeling on the cement spilling out
his love and regrets to a lone insect
he hopes is a reincarnation of his wife.

Clearly as beautiful as any Monarch,
an epiphany of color in my flat world,
the butterfly appears to be listening.
Brilliantly hued wings shift slowly
up and down as if they sense the
coarse human sounds filling the air.

Even once language deserts me,
it/she remains a moment by my side
(together like partners after a dance!)
before soaring into a sky all-at-once blue,
vanishing into her future and my past,
alive and free as our finest memories.

—Bruce Boston

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Eliot Fintushel

MILO AND SYLVIE

Beware the magician's world where everything is illusion, and nothing is as it first appears . . .

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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"Everything has its portion of smell," Milo said. His skin and bones were enthroned in a plush, gold club chair facing the doctor's more severe straight-back with the cabriole legs. Milo strummed his fingers nervously against the insides of his thighs as he looked around the room, richly dark, with scrolled woodwork, diplomas in gilded frames hanging on the wall behind the doctor's mahogany rolltop next to the heavily curtained window. He could smell the doctor's aftershave. He could smell the last client too, a woman, a large woman, a sweating carnivore with drugstore perfume.

"Smell?" Doctor Devore always looked worried. Inquisitive and worried—the look was like a high trump, drawing out all your best cards before you had planned to play them. He had white, curly hair. He wore sweaters and baggy pants that made him look like a rag doll. He was old. His cheeks and jowls sagged like the folds of drapery beside him. He wore thick, wire-rimmed glasses that made his tired eyes look bigger and even more plaintive. He was small, a midget, almost; one got over that quickly, though, because he never acted short.

"It's something my sister used to say."

"Why?"

"I don't remember." Like so much else. Milo moved too quickly for memories to adhere, or for sleep for that matter, except in evanescent snatches. Memories, sleep, *haunted* him. They were never invited guests. His sister's name, for example, which he did not remember, did not remember, *did not remember,* was death to pronounce or even think of.

There was a long pause. Devore was trying to use the silence to suck something out of him—*horror vacui*—but it didn't work. Milo had a practiced grip. The things he had to hold down bucked harder than this shrink.

Dr. Devore broke the silence: "Have you been sleeping any better?"

"Yes."

"Taking the prescription, hmm?"

"Yes." That was a trade-off. The pills let him sleep dreamlessly for longer spells, but with the danger that his grip would loosen.

"Let's talk about one of your dreams. Do you have one you want to talk about?"

Grudgingly, Milo said, "Yes." Could he snatch the cheese and escape the wire?

"Go ahead."

"It's dark. The fog is rolling in."

"Where are *you?*" Devore said. Milo began to cry. "That's all right. Just let the tears come. You don't have to answer right away, you know?"

"I have another dream."

"Okay . . ."

"A dumpster. One of those big, steel dumpsters full of scraps and garbage. A car runs into it."

"Are you driving the car?"

"You don't get it!" Milo hooked one thumb over the side of his pants and tugged down the waist, hiking up his shirt so that Dr. Devore could see his hip. "It was all smashed up! Everything was steaming and sputtering and dripping."

"What are you showing me? Are you telling me you hurt yourself? I don't see any marks, Milo—we're talking about a dream, yes?"

"Yeah. That was while I was in the waiting room just now. I dozed off."

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"You dreamed that you hurt your hip in a car crash, is that it?"

"No, no! The fender, the hood, the engine! That's what was hurt!" Milo began crying again. "I'm a monster, that's all! Give me some more medicine! Give me something stronger! I can't hold on much longer!"

Dr. Devore paused. "Milo, when the car crashed into the dumpster, where were *you?*"

"I have another dream," Milo blurted. He was angry, like a small child choking back tears to shout his malediction.

"Let's stay with the last one . . ."

"A window shatters."

"That's all?"

"That's all." Milo felt his skin and skull shattering like glass. He was collapsing into his own pelvis and lacerating the soft tissue of his remaining viscera—but it was the dream. He shouted too loudly, as if trying to be heard against the roar of a hurricane. "It hurts!"

"The glass hits you?"

"No."

"I don't think I follow, Milo. In all these dreams, where are you?"

"The fog, the dumpster and the car, the window . . ." Milo clamped his bony fingers around the scrolls at the edges of his armchair as if it were an electric chair. He stared straight ahead, straight through Dr. Devore, focusing on ghosts three thousand miles distant, waving from the past like dead men from the ports of a sunken ship.

Devore interrupted him. "Don't say any more if you don't want to, Milo." Milo froze, then slumped back into the chair. Dr. Devore was standing up, hands on his sacrum, arching back and stretching his neck from side to side. It made a little crackling sound. "Anyway, our hour is about up. This was good, Milo. This was very good. You shared some of your dreams with me. We talked a little about your sleep problem, and about your sister . . ."

"I didn't tell you anything about my sister."

"Right. We've got to get you to relax, you know? I am going to increase your chlorpromazine. Your house parents will give you the tablets in the morning and at night. I'll talk to them about it. You shouldn't worry. Just try to do the best you can, you know? And keep track of those dreams for me, will you, Milo?"

"Yeah, sure."

Dr. Devore stood before Milo, waiting for him to get up. He had set up his psychic vacuum pump again, to suck Milo out of the club chair and get rid of him, Milo thought. Devore needed his beauty sleep.

Milo stood, turned, and walked out the door without saying thank you or good-bye. The waiting room was empty. Milo crossed the waiting room, opened the hall door and shut it again without going through. He waited thirty seconds, then returned to Dr. Devore's office door and cupped his ear against it.

He heard Devore part the drapes and open one of the windows; it shuddered and squeaked against the casement. Then he heard the rolltop clack open, and Devore spoke into his tape recorder:

"Milo is on the verge of finding out. He would have blurted it out just now if I hadn't stopped him. It would be most inopportune for him to know everything just now. I think the best course would be to slow him down. The thorazine should help, but we can't rely on it. This is a tricky business. If he's too tight, something fatigues inside him and he manifests in spite of

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himself; if he's too loose, of course, he changes. Can't leave him at the home much longer the way things are going. Somebody's sure to see something, and what happens next may be out of my control. Get Sylvie in there, that's the only way. Remember to call Sylvie tonight, now, soon.

"Oh, yes! He said the thing about smell again, but he doesn't seem to understand what it means—which is good. There's a little time . . . God! I've got to take a nap. My knees are buckling."

The machine clicked off. Milo heard Devore stretch and yawn, then the rustle of clothing peeling off, the two chairs scraping the floor as Devore pushed them together. A moment later he was snoring.

The little machine! The box sheathed in perforated black leather hiding inside Dr. Devore's rolltop with all of Milo's secrets! Like the totemic soul of a primitive: a pouch, a feather, or a whittled doll secreted in a hollow log, proof against soul-snatching demons and enemies. Only, the demon was *in possession* of Milo's soul.

There was a fake window in the waiting room, drapery with a solid wall behind it, and opposite that, a print of some famous painting, a different one every time Milo visited. Sometimes, in fact, it was different when he left than it had been when he arrived; Devore must have paid someone he never saw to slip in and change it periodically, like a diaper service. Mondrian to Dali, Manet to Munch or an anonymous Byzantine, each with a brass name tag on an ornate frame, while Milo conveyed his soul, via Devore, to the skin-covered box! Just now, it was a Chinese painting of a warrior monkey standing on a cloud in a great, plumed hat, brandishing a cudgel.

Milo tiptoed away from the door, hid behind the drapes and waited. He made quite a perceptible bulge there, but he was relying on Devore's drowsiness to get by with it. Being caught might not be so bad either. The way they looked at you then, at the home or at school, cross as it was, felt a lot like love.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed, because there was no daylight in there, but it seemed like a long time, and Milo had not had his thorazine. Below his stomach, inside the habitual knot, an older knot was beginning to ache. Aches in aches, Milo stood flush to the wall, breathing dust behind the drapery.

At last, he ventured out. The snoring had stopped. He pressed his ear to the door and heard nothing. What did he look like dreaming, the little man who harvested Milo's dreams? Milo turned the knob, degree by degree, soundlessly, until it stopped; then he pulled the door ajar and peeked in.

Impossibly, the room was empty. Devore was gone. The club chair and the cabriole chair were still pushed together in the center of the room to form an odd, uncomfortable bed. Milo strode in and slammed the door behind him, as if to test, to make sure his senses hadn't fooled him, that Devore was actually absent. Nothing stirred. There was no other way out except the window, which was actually open, but the office was six stories up.

Milo squinted and cocked his head like a cat listening for rats in the wall. However he had managed it, Devore was not there. Maybe, unawares, Milo had dozed standing up, and Devore had simply left through the waiting room. Milo went to the rolltop and pulled it open. The tape recorder was there. He opened it and took out the cassette. It had Milo's name on it, a cassette all to himself. He put it back in the machine and rewound.

The last rays of sunlight to skirt the top of the building across the street

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shone through a crystal suspended from the window sash, splashing rainbows on the office wall. As the land breeze breathed it back and forth, the crystal shook and spun, whirling colors about the room. Milo had never before seen Dr. Devore's crystal or the rainbows. So there was a dance in the old bagface yet!

The prism clacked against the shivering glass. The tape whirred, then stopped. Milo pressed PLAY:

"Milo Smith. *Smith* not his real name. An assigned name. Nobody knows his real name. First name's probably *Milo,* though. Fourteen. Sporadically guilty of many relatively minor offenses such as disorderly conduct, battery against other children, petty thefts, and so on. Frequently truant. Has been under state guardianship in group homes for about seven years. Generally shy and withdrawn, presents as extremely nervous, with many obsessive mannerisms. Plays his cards close to the chest, this one.

"Referred because of violent, disturbing dreams, waking other boys. Also some evidence of self-inflicted wounds. Chronic sleeplessness, nervosity. Looks like a mess, sunken eyes, thin as a rail, reminds me of the old photos of liberated camps at Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau. All he needs is the striped pants and a star of David.

"Seemed like he came in, then just waited for the hour to end. But he came in! Why? Something going on here. Okayed chlorpromazine for now. Next week. . . ?"

Milo PAUSED to think that one over. Why *had* he come? Nobody could force him. Nobody could hurt him. He hurt himself so badly already, just squeezing and squeezing to stay in control, that there was nothing worse to threaten Milo with. He stretched out on the two armchairs, cradling the tape recorder in his arms like a teddy bear. Think it over: *why?*

Outside the window, the street lamps flicked on. Milo had dozed off, he didn't know for how long, but it was dark. Unusual, dangerous, to sleep so long. Luckily, there had been no dream. There was still a rainbow on the wall—that was a new one! Milo walked to the window and passed his hand in front of the crystal.

That explained it; the crystal was a prop. The rainbow didn't move. It was somehow painted on the wall, painted no doubt over the real rainbow, the one from the crystal at the rainbow moment, sunset behind the MacCauly Building. Funny he'd never noticed it, but he always sat with his back to that wall, and when he came in or left this room, he always had a lot on his mind, or a lot to keep out of his mind.

PLAY:

". . . I want to remind myself here that Sylvie has come up with a way of using Zorn's Lemma for shapeshifting. She finds the maximal element of all the upper bounds of the chains in the shape she's departing from . . ."

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

". . . shapeshifting . . ."

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REWIND. PLAY:

"... shapeshifting ..."

STOP.

Below, a car drove by with its windows rolled down and the radio blasting, about a hound dog.... The old song faded out of hearing, along with the clatter of a dragging muffler. Then there were voices and honking horns. The theater crowd was arriving. Milo stared up at the rainbow on the wall, dimly aglow in the shadowy light of neon from outside.

PLAY:

"... Why do I always think of Sylvie when I think of Milo? Could he be like *us?*"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... Could he be like *us?*"

There was a click, then static, an intentional erasure or else a dumb mistake: the wrong button pressed, the machine dropped, or just old, stretched tape. Then it resumed:

"Now I know something about Milo Smith. *I know what he's doing here, with me.* Once he trusted me enough to start describing those dreams of his, it came together for me—the odd inanimate object romances, the animal reveries, the sensations of bodiless flight, his deep terror; and the physical evidences, like fairy dust on the dreamer's bedclothes in the old folk tales.

"But it's hardly time for Milo to be told anything. First we have to build up the psychic *container.* If he were to realize it now, it would blast him to pieces. Sylvie went through the same sort of thing, but Milo's got the additional problem of this distorted, secret past.

"My approach has been all wrong. I mustn't precipitate any sudden epiphanies. More chlorpromazine. Slow, careful work. Test the ground before each step, Devore, or you'll land the both of you in a dark hole. If the state won't keep paying, screw them! Call it a charity case. God knows, there's plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP. REWIND. PLAY:

"... plenty in it *for me!*"

STOP.

"Dr. Devore?"—a voice out in the corridor. "Dr. Devore? Dr. Devore? Security, Dr. Devore! You in there, sir?" A rapping at the outer door. Fumbling for keys.

The knot in the knot in Milo's belly tightened further. He had to get up to

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ease the pain. He padded to the office door and peeked into the waiting room. The only light in there was the grey-green light that leaked out the door when he opened it, light through the office window from the lamps and signs on the street and the buildings nearby—and the glow of the wall rainbow reflected in the corner of Milo's eye. In the dark of the waiting room Milo saw what must have been an afterimage of the rainbow, as if it were a small animal that had sneaked out ahead of him through the office door.

Except for the rainbow, the waiting room was empty now, but Milo must have been dead-out dozing before, because the painting had been changed again. Someone must have gone in and out of the waiting room without waking him. The monkey warrior was gone. Instead, it was Munch's screamer on the screaming bridge, the air and river screaming.

He heard the key in the lock. For a moment, Milo had a sense of *déjà vu,* the feeling that the turning key was himself. He shut himself in the office again, his heart pounding. Suddenly, to his astonishment, he heard Dr. Devore's voice in the waiting room: "No, wait. I'm sorry. I'll open it for you. I must have fallen asleep."

The sneak! Everybody wants a piece of me. Milo ran to the open window, swung his feet over the ledge—it was a long way down—and listened. He yanked Devore's crystal off the sash by the string that held it, and he threw it out the window. A tiny, occasional glint, it plummeted six stories and shattered on a curbstone.

". . . plenty in it for me!"

He stared at the rainbow wall—all dark. No rainbow. Probably, it was Milo's own shadow blocking the window light from shining on it. He heard the hallway door opening. The voice outside went up nearly an octave: "Oh. Sorry, Doctor. I just had to check. I thought I heard somebody in here. I mean, I *thought* it was you, but I had to make sure."

"No problem. I'm *glad* you checked. It might *not* have been me, after all. I might have been somebody else."

"Right. Everything okay then, right?"

"Right. And I have a weapon, remember?"

"I remember. I still don't think it's a good idea."

"I do."

"You're the doctor."

The door clicked shut. The inner door opened. Milo jumped.

"Can you fly like that all the time, or was it just some kind of crazy fluke?" The big kid speared one of Milo's fries—"You mind?"—and shoveled it on in. He was only an inch taller than Milo, if that, but the swagger made it six. He never stopped talking except to swallow. "Because if you can do that whenever you want to, little man, I've got a proposition for you."

They sat in a corner of the big, greasy restaurant. The light there was like bleach, harsh and merciless. Cadaverous chain smokers sucked coffee and talked to themselves, silently or aloud. With one hand, a lean, gap-toothed Okie was rocking her toddler's walker, while, with the other, finger by finger, she managed a hot-dog bun oozing green. At the next table, three college students discussed Heidegger over meatloaf. The proprietor, Aristotle Jitsi, sweet-talked a girlfriend on the phone pinched between his ear and shoulder, while he scraped the grill.

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The big kid wore a bowler hat and a black leather jacket, the overcoat kind favored by suave Italian street toughs, not the motorcycle kind. He had drawstring pants on, loose, with wide vertical stripes, red and white. His shoes were black leather Danskins—a rope walker? A ballet dancer? The ensemble didn't make much sense. "Well? Can you?"

Milo mopped up ketchup with a crust of his grilled cheese, then didn't eat it. He pushed the whole plate of French fries toward the big kid. "I don't know what happened. . . . Thanks, I'm not hungry any more." Milo sneaked a look down at his own clothes. He never knew what he was wearing until he looked: T-shirt, faded jeans, sneakers, the cowboy belt they gave him last year on his birthday—lassoed Brahma bull buckle.

"You weren't trying to kill yourself, were you?"

"No."

"I think you could do it again. I think you've got some kind of a talent. I was just walking by, and I saw you whistling down like a dropped bomb. I heard the thud. I just about threw up. Then I ran up, and there you were, folding in your wings. Are they wings? Where did you get them? Do you make 'em? Your wings and that furry stuff you tucked away somewhere. For aerodynamics, right? Come on! I'm in the show business, little man. I could do something for you. Tell me some stuff. . . . How about a piece of pie?"

Milo got up from the table and looked around for an exit.

"Hey, sit back down. I'm not done with you. Where you going, anyway? I bet you got no place to stay. Look at you. I can get you a place to stay, no sweat, no charge, but talk to me, little man, talk to me."

Milo started to walk, but a twinge in his calves stopped him. He didn't know what to do with his legs any more. He felt like an unmagnetized compass. Where to go? Not the group home—they'd ship him back to Devore! Outside of that, one place seemed as good as another. He could live *here,* talking to himself, breathing cigarettes, eating grease. He could die *here,* rocking some toddler in a walker, waiting for his teeth to rot.

"Come back," the big kid said. "I'll buy you a piece of pie. I'm rich as Croesus. I'm in the show business."

Milo sat down. "But I don't feel like talking. I don't know what happened, honest. Some guy was after me. He thought I had something he wanted, but I don't have anything. Do I look like I have anything?"

"What about those wings, boy? Those must be something to have."

"Do I look like I have any secret pockets on me?" Milo lifted his arms up over his head. "You must have been seeing things. I just landed lucky."

"No, I don't think so. Something's fishy here, little man, but I don't care. I like you. I live off fishy, anyway. Look at this." The big kid pulled a card out of his inner vest pocket and spun it across the table in front of Milo:

*** M O O N * A N D * S T A R S ***
Spectacles, Phantasmagoria, Puppets
for
Festivals, Conventions, Parties,
Theatrical Events, Promotions
Of Every Conceivable Variety!!!
by
S. VERDUCCI, MASTER SHOWMAN
(Equidecomposabilization Services Available
to Select Clientele)

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"What's *equidecohoozits?*"

"That's a sort of code word, little man. People who need it generally know that word; when they see it on my card, they know that I can supply it. It's a sort of a side line."

"What does it mean?"

The big kid leaned across the table and spoke to Milo in a low voice. He watched Milo as he spoke, as if to measure Milo's response, word by word. "Look here, suppose you got two balls, okay? A great big one and a little bitsy one, both of them thick as a brick. Suppose I told you I had a way of taking the bitsy one apart and putting it back together so it was just as big as the great biggy, or making the biggy into a bitsy without adding or taking away a single atom? You reckon that would be handy?"

"That's what Dede wanted to know!" Milo started in his chair as if he'd touched a high power line. He hadn't spoken or thought that name for eight years. He coughed, trying to hide his shock, but the big kid hadn't missed it.

"Who's Dede?"

"I don't know. Just somebody. I told you, I don't feel like talking."

"Is she some kind of a brain?"

"She was my sister. Leave it alone, okay?"

"Okay, okay!" the big kid said. "I got brains in my family too—brains and weirdoes, take your pick. I'm the only *normal* one . . . Look at the back of the card." Milo had to tilt the card to catch the light just so, but then he saw—there was a rainbow across it. "I'm a puppeteer, little man. I'm S. Verducci, traveling showman: MOON & STARS, Inc. And I want you to work with me. What do you say to that? You'll be rich as Croesus, too."

"I don't know. You gonna put me up for the night?"

"Didn't I say so? Let's go. You're tired, huh? Wait—pie?"

"No."

"So what's your name?"

"Milo."

"Okay, Milo, follow me. Follow me, flying boy." S. Verducci dropped a silver dollar into his glass of water, which was still full. He picked up a crushed, empty hard-pack of Marlboros from the floor, tore off one side and placed it over the top of the glass. Then, holding the cardboard there, he inverted the glass on the table and slipped the cardboard out. The silver dollar was at the bottom of an upside-down glass of water. "Don't you love it? Let the waiter earn his tip, huh? It's okay—Jitsi likes me."

Milo followed S. Verducci past the coffee hounds, the welfare mothers, the college brains—a hooker moving in—and past the counter, to the door.

"Bye-bye Jitsi, you old poisoner!" S. Verducci said.

"Bye-bye, Moon and Stars!"

Out the door into the breezy evening.

They walked twenty blocks, increasingly dark, increasingly run-down. Milo spied Dede watching from behind trash cans, though he was careful not to look. She disguised herself as a pimp cruising by in a vintage Cadillac. Her telescope was trained on Milo from a tenement window. And Devore was with her. He was small. He could hide anywhere, even behind fire hydrants maybe, or down below a sewer grate, phoning Milo's position in to Dede, who had a cop's uniform, a patrol car and a gun. Devore had a gun, too. He'd said so.

Don't think about Dede. There was a way to unthink things, to hold them

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in the blind spot. All it took was a knot in your stomach—and insomnia. *Don't think about . . . who?*

They came to a sooty storefront to which S. Verducci had a key. Stenciled across one large bay window in bold cursive were the words, "THE GRASS AND TREES." Underneath that: "Coffee and Conversation." There was a faint red light inside. S. Verducci turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. The hinges squeaked. The casement groaned. A wonderful smell of wisteria flowed out.

"Everything has its portion of smell," Milo said.

"Anaxagoras!" said S. Verducci. "Smell, scent, essence, *sentience!* Everything is everywhere. Nothing's as solid as it seems! That's my whole business, little man! How did *you* know that?"

"My sister used to say it, that's all."

They walked past round tables with chairs on top of them. At the back, they turned a tight corner, and Verducci flicked on a light. They were at the top of a staircase leading to the basement. "Come on." He led Milo into a sort of black box theater downstairs, with a dozen transplanted church pews around a square platform. There was a large canopied bed onstage. "You can sleep here. I'll sleep upstairs. There's a toilet around the corner. I'll leave the light on at the top of the stairwell so you don't get totally spooked. See you in the morning, champ."

S. Verducci pulled off the bowler. He shook his head, and a stream of brown hair tumbled down to his waist.

"You're a girl!" Milo said.

"Sure. What did you think?"

"What does the 'S' stand for?"

"Sylvie. Sweet dreams, little man." She climbed the stairs, leaving Milo alone, in the cellar, in the dark.

Dede at the library on a Saturday morning, Milo in her lap with a Dr. Seuss. He peers up at the book she's reading, sees diagrams that look like envelopes folded funny and ones like globes with twisted meridians. There are letters Dede says are Greek and words she says are German. One Hebrew letter: aleph. Aleph with a tiny *zero*. Aleph with a tiny *one*. And a lazy eight: infinity.

"Is this how you do it, Milo?" Dede whispers. She doesn't expect an answer. At home Mama is washing her hands. Washing her hands and washing her hands.

Suddenly he is in the dark cellar at *The Grass and Trees* again, the air swarming with hypnagogic images, red and green, intricate, impenetrable geometries. He feels that he has just screamed, but nothing stirs. He rubs himself all over to make sure he is a human being. He checks his skin for fur, his shoulder blades for wings.

Sylvie's in cahoots with Devore—the thought, like a sudden needle, pierces him, as he remembers where he is.

He falls asleep again, and when he blows out the candles, seven of them plus one for good luck, all at once he finds himself on the wrong side of his lips. He is a puff of air eddying around the flames. It only lasts a second. Then all the candles are out. He smiles, but everyone else is screaming. Some of the children cover their eyes. "What's wrong?" Milo says. Dede is watching with intense curiosity. Curiosity and desire.

Mama hasn't seen it. Mama is in the kitchen washing the sink over and

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over. Papa's eyes are bulging, his mouth hangs open, and his muscles are drawn so tight he looks like a starved alley cat. "What did you do? What the hell kind of trick is that?" He licks his lips and scans the room with a wild look. "Never mind! Never mind!" He runs to the door, then runs back, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I didn't see nothing." He shakes one of the guests. "Shut up! Shut up! Everything's okay!" They all stop crying, terrified. "Am I right, Milo? Am I right?"

"Yes, Papa."

"That was a mean, dumb trick, Milo. What, did you sneak under the table and back, huh? Don't you ever let me see you do that again." Milo won't.

"What's the matter?" Sylvie, in her striped pants and a sleeveless undershirt, was standing silhouetted at the cellar door. Scant light from the stairway bathed her like earthshine on a slight, crescent moon.

"Huh?" He sat up. He had been lying fully clothed on top of the covers.

"You shouted. What's the matter? Scared of the dark? Tell me. Don't be ashamed." She walked toward him. Dim, reflected light played on her bare shoulders, through a tangle of hair. A moment of brighter light on one collarbone, as she brushed the hair away, made Milo lift his gaze to the soft, simple curve of her face, the broad forehead, the gentle slope of her nose, and her full lips. The thin fabric of the undershirt hung away from her torso, down from the peaks of her small breasts, and light diffused through the undershirt, shadowing her breasts like X-rays. Then she blended into the teeming dark nearer Milo's bed.

"Stay away."

"You think I'm gonna rape you or something? There's a little blue light I was gonna turn on behind the stage. The techy uses it to see what he's doing when he runs cues. Or maybe you'd like a couple of Kliegs. The control board is back there. I was gonna fiddle with it for you. Don't bother to say thank you."

"Okay. Put on the blue light. Don't touch me, though."

"You're a pip, you know that?"

Milo clutched the covers around him and crouched under the canopy while Sylvie walked past him, barely visible in the deepening shadow toward the back of the room. She was just a glint, now and then, a hint of skin, a wrinkle of fabric, disjointed patches of shifting light. Milo heard a click, blue light spilled faintly around the edge of a curtain, then the curtain was pulled back, and the black room filled with blue objects and blue air. It was as if the tide had gone out, leaving jetsam draped with blue algae on blue sand.

"Okay?" she said.

"Okay . . . did I really scream?"

"Yeah."

"It wasn't the dark. I'm not afraid of the dark. But this is better. Thank you."

"Sure thing. Okay now?" She was crossing the room, making a wide arc around the stage, weaving through the chairs.

"Yeah . . . hey!" Milo called to her as she started to mount the stairs again.

"What?"

"Why's there a bed onstage?"

"Don't ask." She trudged upstairs again. Milo heard her scuffling around,

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then slumping down and groaning quickly into slumber.

In cahoots. Definitely in cahoots. Milo whispered to himself, "I'm going to watch her. I'm going to find out about her. Her and Devore. They're up to something. They think I'm dumb, but I'm going to fool them."

No thorazine tonight. His muscles itched in places he couldn't reach to scratch. Every time he closed his eyes, he was deeply asleep; if he winked them open again, it was as if he'd been out for hours. Every sensum was thick with Devore's malevolence and Sylvie's conspiracy. Like a bombarded infantryman: "Keep a tight ass, Milo," he told himself.

Then Dede was cradling him in her lap, saying, "Everything is made of numbers, Milo. That's what Pythagoras said. Whatever you are, honey, something's the same, see? But what? Is it numbers? Euclid's all wet; there's no *congruence* between a little boy and a BankAmerica Mastercard, is there? No *similarity,* like angles and stuff. They're not even the same *genus* of topological space, because you got holes through your head and your butt and your little winkie, but a charge card's all connected everywhere.

"Something's the same though, because you go from this to that and back again, and whatever you are, you're *you,* aren't you? So how do you do it?"

"Why do you care, Dede?"

"You do such nice things for me, Milo, when you do those change-ums, I never want it to stop. I gotta figure out what's going on, so we don't lose you." She turns pages so furiously, a few of them rip. The librarian says something, but Dede pays no attention. "Maybe it has something to do with equideco . . ."

From upstairs: "Hey! You okay?"

"What?"

"You were screaming again."

"Sorry!"

There was no sunlight in the cellar, and therefore no time, just blue. Milo slept and woke like a subway car surfacing and descending through a dark metropolis. He got up to find the toilet. He stumbled past the control board "backstage," a closet with massive, ancient rheostats, a clipboard on a string, empty Coke bottles, and dust. Passing beyond the sphere of the backstage light, Milo knew where he was by the sound of his footsteps. They echoed more sharply as he reached the tiled room.

The bathroom door was held open by a mop bucket full of dirty water. On its scummy surface there were rainbows. Daylight leaked in through the bathroom window. Milo walked into the light and relieved himself into a urinal. The daylight, the tinkle, the morning breeze, were like a benediction. He walked out past the rainbows, the dimmers, and the stage, to the stairway. He smelled bacon.

He started up the stairs, when a gigantic crow peeked into the stairway from above, cawed a few times and said, in a high, scratchy voice, "Soup's on, little man!" Milo stumbled three steps backward.

Then Sylvie's face appeared next to the crow's. She continued, in the crow's voice, "Eggs and toast for humans! *Pictures* of eggs and toast for the puppets!" Then she thrust out one arm, at the end of it a puppet made of five or six tiny men in trench coats—one puppet with multiple jaws that moved together: "*Hiss! Booo!*"

"Oh shut up," Sylvie said, "or I'll give you a picture of angleworms to eat."

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She pulled out of sight, her puppets with her. A second later the tiny men reappeared. "*Angleworms!*" they shuddered. "We're not partial to *angleworms!*" They scooted off.

The walls upstairs were covered with posters, masks, hand puppets, and marionettes, from minuscule to elephantine, hanging by hooks and wire. There were posters for wassail consorts, pantomimes, plays by people named Beckett, Ionesco, Tzara, Artaud, old cigarette ads enameled in three colors, embossed on tin; also a wall-sized photograph of a man gleefully smiling as he leapt, birdlike, from a high window onto the street below—a bicyclist trundling past, unawares. "SAUT DANS LA VIDE," it said underneath. "LEAP INTO NOTHINGNESS," Sylvie explained.

Among the masks there were bug-eyed Balinese demons with teeth like tusks; there were lions' heads, monkeys, frogs, grotesque insects, the mask of a beautiful girl with a skull mask nested underneath, also a variety of clown noses and Swiss carnival masks, larval, exaggerated, alive, that Sylvie said she had received from a "business associate" in Basel. And the puppets: the huge crow and the little men back on their hooks already, mustached villains with black hats, Punch and Judy, Orlando Furioso in a plumed helmet, and also a variety of animals and inanimate objects. There was a printing press puppet, a city block whose tenement windows were mouths, a sky with star eyes and the moon for a mouth, a mountain, a lock and key, a long-legged airplane, and a truck with teeth under its hood, among many still stranger.

Everything has its portion of smell. Sylvie had taken down the chairs from one round table and was laying down two steaming dishes of eggs and toast. Several flies accompanied her, and when Milo approached, they found their way to his face and neck. He slapped at them.

"Don't," Sylvie said. "Those are friends of mine, Eric and Mehitabel. The small one is Beulah. Leave them alone. They're from upstate."

"Are you for real?"

"I'm a vegetarian, okay?"

"What about the pig? I smelled bacon."

"Nope. I can't help what kind of grease is caked on the burner. That's the owner's, not mine. Pull up and chow down, little man. We've got a day ahead of us."

Milo sat. Sylvie poured them both coffee. "You're strange," Milo said.

"Strange is good. I like strange."

"You're not rich. Not if you sleep in *this* place."

"Did I say I was rich, Milo?"

"Rich as Croesus."

"No, you got me wrong." Sylvie squeegeed egg yolk with her toast and folded the toast into her mouth. "Rich in creases, that's what I said. My costume gets all creased sleeping here under the tables, see? Rich in creases, is what I said. It's a Biblical locution."

"Sure. Who owns this place, if *you* don't?" Milo nibbled at his toast, played with the spoon in his coffee. Nonchalant—*that's the ticket.*

"*The Grass and Trees?* Some guy you don't know."

"You work for him?" *Bet it's Devore,* he thought.

"Hell, no. This is a *fellowship* I got here. No strings attached. Guy appreciates my artistic ability, see? Why aren't you eating? Miss the meat?"

"No."

"Well?"

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He started on the eggs, and then he couldn't stop. He ravened the toast and licked the plate. Sylvie poured him some more coffee. "Hurry it up, though. We got a gig the other side of town."

"We?"

Sylvie shooed Milo from the table, cleared it, and had him put the chairs back up and sweep while she did the dishes. She ducked behind a counter into a small enclosure covered with green striped awning, and fished out two black suitcases. She handed one of them to Milo. "Wait a minute." Sylvie unlatched her case and pulled out a collapsible top hat, flattened to a disk. She contrived to blow on it, while flexing it just so, and it popped open. She twirled the hat between her fingers so that it wound up on Milo's head. He flinched. She grabbed her bowler from behind the counter and twirled it onto her own head the same way. "See? It's just business, little man. Now you're with *me*. Moon and Stars!"

That's what was stenciled on the suitcases, too:

*** M O O N *

on hers,

A N D * S T A R S ***

on his.

"Do I have to wear the hat?" he said.

"Sure you do! It suits you, too. Isn't it neat how it changes . . ." She pushed ahead of him to unlock and open the door, and he thought he heard her say, ". . . just like you?"

They only spent a few minutes in daylight, and Sylvie led Milo underground again, this time into the subways. They sat side by side in the strobing, shaking car with the suitcases on their laps; it was awkward, but Sylvie insisted they carry them that way. She also insisted that Milo sit on her left and that they hold the suitcases with the lettering facing out:

*** M O O N * . . . A N D * S T A R S ***

"Free advertising," she said. No one looked. No one *ever* looked on the subway. If they looked, it meant trouble. Anything could happen down there, Milo learned; a baby could be born, water could spring from a stone, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse could thunder from a businessman's lapel, and everybody would turn their page of *Newsweek* or the *Enquirer* or the New York *Times* and keep their eyes down and their elbows close to their hips.

"What were you doing on the street where I fell yesterday?" Milo said between Manchester Avenue and Lafayette Park. *Make it sound like ordinary conversation.* "You were right below there, weren't you?"

"It was listed in my ephemeris: 'Boy falling out of the sky northeast of the MacCauly Building.'"

"Come on, Sylvie."

Sylvie shifted uncomfortably on the crowded bench. "Hey! You're the mystery man, not me, champ."

"So?"

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"I was going someplace, that's all. Do you have to take up so much room?"

Milo scrunched himself farther into the end of the bench. "Have you ever been up there in that building where I fell from?"

"Where you *flew* from, you mean? Maybe. Yeah. Why? Yeah." She looked away.

Don't push too hard. She already knows I'm suspicious. She probably thinks I've seen her up there, and she's cooking up an excuse right now.

"I might have a client up there, I think, if it's the building I'm thinking of," Sylvie said.

"Equidecohoozits?"

"No. Well, sort of. Paintings. Copies of the Masters. Subscription service. It's another sideline. I got a *couple* of clients like that in that block. What were *you* doing up there?"

"Seeing a shrink."

"You crazy?"

"Just nervous. I have trouble sleeping, like."

"You're telling me!"

"What do you mean?"

The train stopped. Sylvie slid sideways into Milo, then righted herself as the doors slid open and two women rushed in, business executives, briefcases under their arms, talking about wheat futures. They grabbed a stanchion and braced themselves. The doors clapped shut, and the train lurched forward.

"What did you mean?" Milo said.

"You kept me up half the night, screaming and talking in your sleep."

"More than the once? What did I say?"

"Who cares? Stick with me, Milo. I'll teach you how to sleep. . . . Let's move to the next car. I don't like those two ladies."

"Did I say something about Dede?"

"Every damn thing you say is about Dede, Milo. Get up and let's go to the next car. They're looking at me."

One of the execs was edging closer. "Moon and Stars? Hey, Moon and Stars! I want to talk to you! I've got another deal. Hey!" There was a quality of pleading in the woman's voice. Sylvie shoved Milo through the passage to the next car, and then the next, brutalizing whoever blocked the way and letting them curse.

"I hate that," she said at last. "I did something for her when I was still green, and now she won't leave me alone."

"What do you mean, everything I say is about Dede?"

"It's a big city, Milo. You can say whatever you like."

The train stopped. They squeezed out, pinched between the shoulders of a dozen workers, shoppers, and students, only some of whom, in the subterranean light, looked human. Milo dutifully clutched his suitcase handle, clutched it so hard it made him think of the way he was clutching something else, in his belly, clutching so deep and so hard for so long that he had stopped thinking of it as something he *did*; instead it had come to seem like something he suffered. They climbed up into a broad, cobbled square separated by a massive archway from a sunlit park.

Sylvie walked briskly. Milo quickened his pace to stay abreast. They passed through the arch, across a meadow the size of a football field, and down a dirt pathway through a clump of trees, until they came in sight of a picnic shelter.

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"This is it," she said. "Employee picnic. Dingsboomps, Incorporated or something. Full payment on day of performance. Watch this."

A few children were running toward them from the shelter. As they came within badgering distance, Milo, hanging back a few yards, saw Sylvie's suitcase stop in midair while Sylvie herself kept walking, still holding on. Like a tugboat trying to pull the shoreline out to sea, Sylvie suddenly was yanked back. The children giggled. Sylvie scowled. She pulled at the case. It wouldn't budge. She pushed it. She leaned against it. The children fell down laughing.

Between her teeth, she said to Milo, "Kick it."

"Huh?"

"Kick it."

Milo kicked it. The case flew forward, tumbling Sylvie to the ground. Milo rushed to help her.

"You ass," she said. "This is *part* of it. Give me your hand." Befuddled, he did it. Sylvie grabbed, pulling Milo down on top of her, sputtering and flailing. "Whoa!" she said—theatrically. The children howled. They ran to the shelter to get their friends.

Milo lay face down, blinking and huffing, on top of Sylvie, face up, laughing. "You'll do," she said. His chest was on top of her chest. He could feel the breasts inside her smock. His legs were on top of hers. Her hair, the little of it that spilled out of the bowler when she tumbled, was in his face.

He scrambled to his feet, tucked his shirt in, wiped his face, recovered the fallen top hat. Sylvie got up. They picked up the suitcases and walked.

"Why do you dress like a boy?" he said.

"Show biz, little man. It's all showbiz. Why do you?"

Sylvie found the Dingsboomps honcho and set up where he told her to. Inside the "A N D * S T A R S ***" suitcase there were plastic pipes, tent poles, and colored nylon sheets with sleeves sewn along the hems for the poles and pipes to make a frame. It took fifteen minutes to erect the puppet stage, five of them to shoo away the children and grab back joints and dinguses they'd boosted from Milo's suitcase.

Once the puppet stage was up, Sylvie was ruthless about keeping kids away. "This is our space, see?" she said to Milo, stooping low in the red light filtering through the nylon. She was hanging puppets and props on hooks backstage. "Nobody but showfolk here, Milo. If Mr. Dingsboomps comes back here, we boot him. If it's the President of the United States, we boot him. If it's God Almighty with Saint Peter and Saint Paul . . . what?"

"Huh?"

"What do we *do?*" she said, exasperated.

"We boot 'em," Milo said.

"That's right. You gotta draw the line, Milo. You see what I mean?" She thrust her arm in and out of a few of the puppets hanging upside-down below the stage, practicing transitions. "Go find the guy in the suit and tell him we're ready. Then come back here with me. Got it?"

"Yuh!" Milo ran.

Sylvie's puppet show was a Chinese folk tale: Stone Monkey. Milo crouched low and handed her things when she clucked, scowled or elbowed him. He watched, fascinated.

First, the initial phases of the creation of the universe were enacted: 129,000 years in twelve parts (sixty seconds each) represented by cacophonously squabbling puppets of mouse, bull, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent,

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horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog, and pig. After another twenty-seven thousand years, Sylvie's *Pan Gui* smithereened the Enormous Vagueness (a gelatinous blob manipulated by rods and strings). At last, halfway through the show, Stone Monkey was born atop the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit from a rock that Sylvie reported, in the wavering voice of an Ancient Taoist Sage, to be precisely thirty-six feet five inches in height and twenty-four feet in circumference.

Rascally Stone Monkey terrorized Heaven and Earth, absconding with various elixirs, virtuous gems, and magic weapons from the Jade Emperor—and anybody else who got in his way. In the end, on a bet with Buddha, he pissed on the Five Pillars at the End of the Universe—some children applauded, some booed, some giggled nervously—but they turned out to be the Buddha's fingers. Big Bud grabbed up poor Monkey and imprisoned him in a mountain of iron. Curtain.

The instant the curtain fell, Sylvie said, "Get the money." In a louder voice, she announced, "Children or others coming within two feet of the puppet stage will be shot," and she started taking everything apart.

Always, they slept and breakfasted at *The Grass and Trees*. Supper at Jitsi's. They did shows a few times a week at places all over town, indoors and out: libraries, loading docks, the beach, the park, a historical society, some rec centers and settlement houses, street fairs, block parties, and a hospital or two. "If they knew what I was," Sylvie said, "they'd never hire me. But I look like your clean-cut American kid, now don't I?"

"So what *are* you, Sylvie?" Milo would say.

"Oh, go fish! When are you gonna show me those wings?"

"Go fish, yourself!"

Milo learned the setup routine and could strike quicker than Sylvie after a while. He started doing a few puppets, notably Lord Buddha and, in Sylvie's "Trash Show," a bilious dumpster named Hector. He did chores like filling Monkey's rubber bladder with water for the piss scene, and velcroing the Enormous Vagueness back together after Pan Gui *decomposed* it. He learned what to say to Sylvie's patrons, how to accept their money or put them off when they were late setting up.

He enjoyed himself. He got a little sun tan. His ribs stopped showing. The hollows around his eyes disappeared. He got to know Jitsi, who called him "Little Man," because that's what he heard Sylvie call him.

Sylvie paid Milo part of her take, fivers at first, then tens and an occasional twenty. When they busked, he got half the hat. "For street work," she said, "we're strictly partners." He liked that.

After the first week or so, Milo forgot about investigating the Devore-Sylvie connection. It just didn't seem so important any more. When Sylvie disappeared, on off days, without explanation or apology, Milo took himself to the zoo, the beach, or the museum. There was never anyone at *The Grass and Trees* except Milo and Sylvie—and the Monkey King. The owner was on vacation, she said.

Milo would be settling into his fitful night's sleep, or would wake at an unknown hour—all the hours were dark down there—and hear the Monkey King cudgeling Lord Erlang. "Take that, you shriveled pus bag!" He would creep sometimes to the foot of the stairs to hear it better.

"You can't fool me, you imbecilic macaque!" Sylvie blustered *basso profundo,* then squealed as Monkey: "Kowtow, pig-face, or I'll knock you silly!"

One night Sylvie surprised him by shouting, in her own voice, "Come on

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up here, Milo. I know you're awake. You might as well help me with the chase sequence."

He walked upstairs and saw Sylvie's puppet theater set up in one of the bay windows, facing in. It was lit eerily from inside—blood red. The puppet theater had been transformed into a weird temple with rows of fluted columns (papier-mâché) and stained glass windows (cellophane). The God Erlang, frightening in the red light, appeared in full battle array, carrying a huge lance, huge, that is, in proportion to his own size of ten inches or so.

Suddenly, the opening of the puppet stage closed in on itself. The carpet Erlang stood on lapped at him like a tongue, the columns gnashed like teeth, the proscenium was like a lip smacking against the apron. Erlang barely managed to wedge the theater space open with his lance.

"It's Monkey's mouth, Milo," Sylvie said. She left Erlang there, his head drooping lifelessly on his chain mail. "He's equideco'ed into a temple, get it?

"First, Monkey turns into a sparrow and Erlang turns into a kite. Then Monkey is a fish, and Erlang is a fish-hawk. When Monkey changes to a water-snake, Erlang turns into a red-crested grey crane. What can Monkey do? He turns into a bustard. Look." She showed him a thin-billed, long-legged plop of a bird-puppet, with an enlarged face retaining a few essentials of Stone Monkey. "That's the lowest. A bustard'll let anything hump it—even crows. Promise me you won't ever be a bustard, flying boy."

"Huh?"

"Anyway, Erlang shoots him then. So he takes off and turns himself into this temple. See? This flagpole is Monkey's tail, only I haven't Sobo-glued the hair on yet. This whole thing *here* is Monkey's mouth. The windows are his eyes. But Erlang is on to him. He threatens to break the window panes. That would blind old Monkey."

"It's great, Sylvie! How did you do that?"

"Adhesives," she said. "Everything is adhesives, Milo, in the show business anyways: duct tape, hot glue, velcro, rivets—this is like my catechism, see?—stuff inside other stuff all over the place. I wanna start doing this story in a week. Sound okay?"

"Teach me."

"That's all I wanted to hear." She led him behind the puppet stage, into the heart of the red glow, and started to fill his hands with odd things.

"Sylvie . . ." he said.

"Yeah?"

"How can Monkey do all that? I mean, what is he supposed to be that he can change into stuff that way?"

She stopped what she was doing and looked at Milo. There was nothing in the entire world outside this small ball of red light, Monkey's mouth, the jumble of props and puppets, the window glass behind them—"noitasrevnoC bns əsseoD . . ."—Milo's eyes, Sylvie's eyes, each other's eyes in each other's eyes. "He's a *shapeshifter,* Milo. A *shapeshifter.*"

Inside himself, Milo squeezed: not a tightening, but a pushing together, the way he might squeeze the string together on both sides of a knot, to let more slack in for the undoing. There was no thought before him, but a sort of *déjà vu.* "Dede . . ." he said.

". . . Sylvie, you mean."

"*Sylvie,* I feel like I want to tell you something."

"I don't think so," she said. "We've got a lot of lines to learn here, a lot of cues to get down. Hold this." She handed him Monkey's Gold-Banded As-

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You-Will Cudgel, Weight 13,500 Pounds. She got up and switched on the overhead light. It was a cheap chandelier. The crystals dangled and made little rainbows on Lord Erlang, the puppet heads, masks and posters on the walls, "SAUT DANS LA VIDE," and all. They went to work.

There were never any customers, no coffee, no conversation; day after day, the chairs never came off the tables except for Sylvie and Milo. Once, an exterminator showed up with a gas mask, a heavy cylinder, and a spray gun that looked like a sci-fi blaster; Sylvie nearly beat him unconscious, shoving him back out the door, while he waved his Service Orders in pink and blue and protected his private parts.

"Over my dead body," she said.

"Vegetarian!" Milo shook his head.

"They might be Stone Monkey, flying boy. They might be Franz frigging Kafka. How the hell do you know who the cockroaches are? Go kill, if you want to." She stalked out and didn't come back until the dark of the next morning, when she woke him to borrow some cash. It took Milo two days to feel that he had made it up to her.

The fifth week, she taught him how to sleep. She whispered to him in the dark. He let her onto the stage, but not too close: "Milo, there's a bowl at the bottom of your belly, a big bowl—can you feel it?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, every time you take a breath, like, the bowl kind of fills up with air. Doesn't that feel good?"

"I guess."

"And every time you breathe out, it kind of steams off, like soup steaming into cold air, see? You don't have to do a thing, little man. Just feel that bowl fill up, and then feel the steam float off it. Watch how it goes out your mouth and nose, and then feel the air coming in there again. Over and over. Because it feels good, that's all. If you start thinking about something, just go back to the bowl again. Nobody's keeping track. You don't have to get past *one*. Just one . . . one . . . one—see? That's the *real* way to count. All those other numbers are a lot of crap. Then, if it's night, you fall asleep, and if it's day, you keep awake. Get it?"

"I'll try it, Sylvie, but I'm scared."

"Tell me about it, sky-jumper boy. Scared!"

"How old are you?" he asked, staring at her with sudden intensity.

"A million."

"Come on, Sylvie!"

"Seventeen," she said.

"I'm fifteen. We're practically the same."

"Dream on, little man."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"Did you ever . . . ?"

"Yes." Suddenly she took his hand. "Not yet, Milo. It's too soon. But I feel it too. I think it might happen. Don't push, okay?"

"Okay."

She cocked her head at him and bit her lip in a way that melted whatever of Milo remained solid before Sylvie. "What do you see when you look at me, Milo?"

"A girl—what do you mean?"

"When you see the moon and stars, maybe it'll be time then . . ."

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"Sylvie, I want to tell you something about myself."

She looked away. "I gotta go somewhere. Tell me when I get back. . . . Do you have any money? I'm a little short."

At the beach that day, lying in the sun on a hulk of driftwood, sand dusting his face, fine sea air puffing his shirt and filling his lungs like a sail, Milo breathed. Water welled, sucked, and whispered around him. Waves lapped. The bowl filled and emptied. Thoughts came and went. Inside him, a knot loosened.

Dede was saying, "Milo, how can you be so small?" *She* was *big.* She was the Jolly Green Giant. She was King Kong, Mount Everest, the Moon. He felt that he was looking at her the wrong way through a microscope. She flipped him, and he came up heads. She laughed. "I mean, where's the rest of you, Milo? Don't worry, I won't spend you. I wonder what Galileo would say about this. He's the one who figured out how there are as many square numbers as there are numbers, baby. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . . or 1, 4, 9, 16, 25 . . . for each of each there's one of the other—*savvy?*—even though the one bunch looks bigger, even though the one bunch is *a part of* the other. Is that how it is for you, Milo?" She tickled him on the eagle's breast. "Lots or little, somehow you're still my little Milo. Don't you *lose* something when you turn to a quarter? Don't you *get* something when you turn to a blimp? How *do* you do those change-ums?"

The bowl filled, the bowl emptied. The sea. The wind. A knot inside him came undone. "I'm a *shapeshifter!*"

The sky darkened. The lake began to glow so intensely blue-green, seething in its basin, that it seemed more emotion than liquid. Strati knit the sky shut. Thunder. Milo climbed down from the log, brushed the sand off and started running. He was supposed to meet Sylvie in front of the bathhouse for a show in the old carousel enclosure.

"When the great world horse pisses, it rains," Dede had told him once. "Everything is transformations—it says so here in the Upanishads. Wanna hear more?"

"No." It had frightened him.

Now, just as in Dede's Upanishads, the rain broke like piss from a tight bladder. It sprayed down. The world horse whinnied. Its eyes flashed. The sand was speckled then splotched then rutted, and Milo was spattered with wet sand, splashing, pool to pool, toward the bathhouse. Then the hail began to fall. His scalp tickled. His hair sparkled with hail. When he brushed the tiny hail stones out, his hair *crunched.*

It only lasted a few moments, and the drumming of rain and hail subsided. He could hear the waves again, breathing back and forth far behind him, and the flag by the bathhouse flapping like a faltering conversation.

Sylvie was pacing back and forth between two pillars at the top of the bathhouse steps, just under the eaves of the roof, protected from the downpour. The broad stone steps were littered with tiny hailstones that crackled under Milo's feet.

"Sylvie!" he shouted. "I've got to tell you something. You've got to listen."

"Look, I'm in a hurry, Milo. There's a guy waiting on me inside there, and then we still have that show to do."

"But Sylvie . . ."

A tall wiry man in a Hawaiian shirt strolled out of the men's door across the landing from Sylvie and Milo. He was balding but meticulously groomed and greased, with sideburns down to his long, heavy jaw. His fin-

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gers were covered with rings. "Hey, what's the holdup *now*? My client is getting impatient."

Sylvie turned toward him. "One minute. Just wait inside. I never let you down yet, did I?".

"Okiedokie." He ducked back in.

"Listen, Milo." Sylvie was slightly trembling. So was Milo, but Sylvie wasn't wet. "I'm going to leave in a second, but I need you to stay here. You gotta go in where Lenny is and give him something for me—a box with some stuff inside. Watch him, Milo. Watch that he's careful with the thing I leave him, okay?"

"Sure, Sylvie . . ."

"Listen. The guy he's with will do some stuff—it won't take long—and then Lenny'll give you some money. And he'll give you the box back. Make sure you get that box back and everything in it. *Mint.* Understand?" She handed him something. She had to push it into his hand, because at first he didn't see it, he had been focusing so intently on Sylvie's eyes. It was an ice pick.

He didn't know what to make of it at first. "Sylvie?"

"You won't have to use it, don't worry. It's just in case. You might have to *show* it to him—that's the worst it could get. Then he would give you everything and run. Lenny's not brave like you, jumper boy. Believe me, I know Lenny."

Milo put the ice pick under his shirt, inside his belt.

"Let Lenny leave. Just stay there by the showers. Make sure he's gone. Make sure nobody's around. If anybody's around, wait till they're gone. Put the box down on a bench. Come out to the door, and wait. I'll meet you there in less than a minute, guaranteed." She took a deep breath and huffed it out.

"Okay," she said, strictly business now, all the tension turned to purpose. "Turn around, Milo. I gotta do something you can't see. Then I'll split, and I'll leave the package there for you to take in to Lenny. Just turn around, count to twenty, then do what I told you. Get it?"

"Yes, Sylvie."

"You're soaking wet, you jerk." She smiled and tousled his hair. "Don't you know to come in out of the rain?" Then she pushed his shoulder to make him turn.

"One, two . . ." rain dripping from the eaves. His teeth chattered a little. At twenty, he turned around and Sylvie was gone. There was a hat box on the landing, bound with a red ribbon. Milo picked it up and carried it across the landing and in through the men's door, hugging it closely to his chest with both arms. The ice pick pricked his thigh a little when he stepped, but it didn't hurt much.

He didn't see anyone at first. He was standing in a large, echoey dome with arched passages leading off every sixty degrees or so. The sound of slowly dripping water boomed all around him. He stood near the center trying to figure out which way to go, when he heard a voice: "Psst! Hey, kid! This way!" Milo followed the voice as well as he could.

Moving into one of the small passageways, the quality of sound changed so abruptly that he felt someone had boxed his ears. Or else he was walking inside a sea shell, or inside the labyrinth of his own ear. The passage opened into a small, concrete courtyard with showers along the perimeter and a few benches near the middle. The hard floor sloped down toward a

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drain in the center. Milo looked up. The sky was the color of iron. He was cold.

Suddenly Lenny was at his side. "Surprised you, huh?" He had come from a shower stall beside the entrance. "I had to take a leak. Mr. Jones used the regular facilities. He'll be right here. . . . You a pal of Sylvie's? She never used you before."

Milo heard steps echoing behind him. He turned and backed out of the way, toward the benches. Mr. Jones was a thick, crewcut man with a flaccid face. He wore a stiff, white short-sleeved shirt that fairly glowed in the stormy light. He squinted and cocked his head at the sight of Milo. "This isn't a girl."

Lenny laughed. "So what? So she sent an associate. You'll notice he's got the merchandise."

Jones rolled his eyes. He looked disgusted. "That ain't all he's got, Lenny."

"Huh?"

"This associate here has got a weapon in his belt," Jones said. Milo looked down around the hat box to his waist. The soaked shirt was bunched around the handle of the ice pick. Jones stepped toward Milo and extended one hand, palm up. "Give."

"Come on, kid," Lenny said. "You don't need that. We trust each other here. God! I'm sorry, Mr. Jones. The kid doesn't know how we do business, is all."

"Sure. So give."

Milo didn't move. He looked back and forth between Lenny and Mr. Jones. For some reason, he didn't feel worried about them. He was worried about something else. Something Lenny had said.

"Sylvie doesn't *use* me."

Lenny smiled. "Tough. Very tough. Very impressive. Okay. Sylvie doesn't *use* you. Just give Mr. Jones the knife."

"It's an ice pick," Milo said. He looked straight at Jones. "And I'm keeping it. Sylvie didn't say anything about giving it to you—unless you try to cheat me."

"He's a *kid,* for crissakes!" Lenny laid a hand on Mr. Jones's shoulder. Mr. Jones kept his hand extended and his eyes straight on Milo. "Nobody's got anything to gain by violence here, am I right? Let's just do our business and adjourn. Okay, Mr. Jones?"

Jones nodded slowly. "*I'm* not impressed. I'm not *pleased.* But we'll let it go, because I respect Lenny, and because I think this little boy would lose his lunch before he pricked anybody with that steel dick. Also, I have a gun. . . . So, let's see the goods."

Jones stepped back. Lenny gave Milo a sheepish look. Facing Milo, so Jones couldn't see, Lenny mouthed the words: "He doesn't have any gun." Lenny shrugged. Milo held out the box to Mr. Jones. Jones took it from Milo and carried it to one of the benches, where he laid it down and undid the ribbon.

Lenny stayed a few feet back with Milo. "You're wet, kid. Quite a downpour, huh?"

"Don't get the box wet," Milo said to Jones. The wooden bench was damp. Jones shot him a black look and snarled something under his breath. Jones lifted the cover from the round box and laid it down on the bench beside the box itself. He reached in and pulled out a roll of cash. He fanned it, then removed the rubber band around it, pulled out one of the bills and held it at arm's length to look it over. He did the same thing with a few others, turn-

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ing them over, flapping them and pulling them out with a snap. Then Mr. Jones took a magnifying glass from his pocket and examined one of the bills more closely.

He returned the magnifying glass to his pants pocket. He stacked the bills together and bound them with the rubber band again. He put the cash back into the box, closed it and tied the ribbon with the same sort of bow it had had before.

"So?" said Lenny.

Mr. Jones handed the box back to Milo and smiled. He turned to Lenny. "It's crap."

"What do you mean, it's crap? You can't tell me this is crap. This is the work of a goddam artist. Uncle fucking Sam himself couldn't tell this stuff from the real thing."

"I can. It's crap."

"You're trying to weasel a better deal out of me, aren't you, Harold? You said if this passed muster you'd front me the ten thou. I told you I could guarantee delivery of the rest in two weeks. Okay, you said. Two weeks, you said. Ten thou up front on approval, you said."

"*On approval.*"

"There's nothing wrong with this job. I'm telling you Sylvie's guy is an artist. He's a Da Vinci, Harold. Nothing's wrong with it. What's wrong with it?"

"It's off, that's all. The border's off. The weave is funny. We won't work with it. Find another distributor—it's your funeral."

"Somebody's supposed to give me some money," Milo said.

Jones turned on him, laughing. His face was like bread dough being folded and kneaded. His lips curled back, showing the gums, big and pink, like a horse's. "What, are you gonna pull out your ice pick now? You an artist too? You gonna make me into an ice sculpture, kid? You guys are a million laughs."

Jones walked into the passage to the main chamber.

"Harold!" Lenny turned his head to shout after him, but didn't *move* an inch. He looked beaten. "Harold! Hey! Wait a minute here! Harold . . . Shit!"

"Are you gonna give me the money?" Milo asked Lenny.

"You're a real piece of work, kid, you and that bitch of a sister you got."

"She's not my sister."

"Give me the box. Screw Mr. Jones. I'll find another Mr. Jones."

"I'm supposed to take the box back to Sylvie. You're supposed to pay me."

Lenny grabbed at the hat box. Milo swung it out of his reach.

"I don't need this, kid," Lenny said. "I don't need your whore sister either, not after this. She screwed up. Give me the damn box. I'll pay her when I get *my* advance, see? This is supposed to be our sample. This is supposed to buy me a little time while our printer gets his act together. You see how many people you're holding up here, kid? Me, the printer, the printer's family, *my* family . . ." He was walking forward as Milo walked back, between the benches, toward the far showers. ". . . and Sylvie too. She's got no use for it, without I get some dough on it for her. Now, *gimme.*"

Milo was backed against a wall under a shower head. Lenny took another swipe at the box. Milo reached back and turned on the shower, spraying Lenny full in the face. Milo grabbed the ice pick from his belt. The point gouged Milo's own stomach, and his soaked shirt reddened. He looked down, uttered a small cry of surprise, and dropped the ice pick.

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Lenny stopped sputtering and flailing. He stood still, with the spray pelting his face and plastering his sparse hair down in absurd curls. He stared at the blood welling up along Milo's belt. He stepped back out of the shower. "Oh, God, what a mess! Kid, you keep it. You keep the damn paper. Tell Sylvie she screwed up. Oh, God! Equidecomposabullshit! I musta been outa my gourd! Tell her this is the last time she does a job for anybody east of Topeka. And get a doctor, kid!" He turned and ran.

"She's not my sister," Milo said. He turned off the shower. There was a shallow pool of red before him, pushed outward by the force of the spray and streaming back again toward the drain behind his heels. Like a drunkard navigating one sensum at a time, Milo looked at his right arm and saw that the hat box was still cradled there, soaked; then he found his feet and walked back to the benches, trailing bloody water.

He laid the box down on a bench. He started back toward the main chamber, but as soon as he entered the passageway, the air filled with bright paisleys, and he found himself on his knees, gasping. He pulled up his shirt to look underneath. He could see the lip of the wound, where blood oozed. "It's not so bad," he said. He slumped down onto his buttocks. He was about to black out, but he forced himself awake. He rolled onto all fours, then stood up, a little at a time. He leaned his shoulder against the wall of the passage and slid along, like a child pulling himself along the gutter of a swimming pool.

He was halfway down the passage when he heard Sylvie's voice behind him, in the courtyard, among the showers. "Milo! Milo, what happened? Whose blood is this?"

He started to say "Dede's," but stopped it before his tongue left his palate. *Dede's blood!* He looked at his fingers, and for a moment he thought that they were bloody claws . . .

Dede lies before him, all bloody. Her spasms are like the jerks of a severed frog leg. He looks at his fingers. The claws are just now retracting into his fingertips, the carpal pad receding into a palm, the fur on his forearm turning into the slightest blond down. He cries, and his chin shudders into a gelatinous ooze, pulling upward, shortening, then hardening again, as the fangs recede with a squeak, shrinking into his gums and out of sight. "Dede! Dede! Did I do what you wanted? Dede!" He looks around for help. His knees have softened and recongealed to face the right direction now. The boy he was supposed to kill for Dede, the one who wouldn't be her lover, is gone. The door has been thrown open and Milo can hear running down the street. "Dede, please say something!" He looks at his bloody fingers . . .

"Mine, Sylvie," he said. "It's *my* blood!" There was something hilarious about it. He started to laugh. He turned to look back toward the showers, back to where Sylvie's voice had come from. The bit of sky he saw had cleared. There was a bright rainbow arching above the concrete wall, blue to red, and a fainter one above it, red to blue. He took one step toward the courtyard, and *everything* went red, then black.

"I'm a shapeshifter, Sylvie."

"You dope!" She was changing the dressing again. Her face hovered above him. She was biting her lip. He could see that she was working hard not to cry.

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"Where are we?" He was lying on a bed made of two chairs pushed together and covered with a white sheet. He had been undressed. He lay naked under another sheet.

"Someplace, that's all. I took you to a doctor. It's the first time in my whole life I missed a booking, and it's *your* fault, little man."

"Did I tell you what happened?"

"Yeah. Who needs those crooks, anyway?" She kissed him on the forehead. "Milo . . . you were a champ. I can't believe how brave you are. I'm sorry I put you in that spot."

"I'm a shapeshifter, Sylvie. I remember everything. I breathed, and I remembered my sister, Dede. I did stuff for her. I was keys and credit cards and . . . *money* . . ." He stopped talking. Then he said it again: "The money!"

Sylvie looked away. "I'm sorry." The room was dark behind her.

"It was *you!*"

Sylvie shrugged.

"You were the money!" Milo said.

"I do stuff for Lenny sometimes. He had a press going somewhere, all set to turn out fifties, hundreds, deluxe items, Milo, really good work, but they needed some front money. I provided Lenny with a sample, is all. Like a grant application, see? They weren't ready to print yet. He was just supposed to show it and collect the advance. Then he pays me. Anyway, that was the idea."

"Was that Lenny *Zorn?*"

"What?" Sylvie looked at him with a slightly shocked expression, like a hoer who has struck an unexpected rock in a well-cultivated field. "Lenny *who*. . . ? Wait a minute. How do you know about that? You mean *Zorn's Lemma,* don't you? How did you hear about Zorn's Lemma?" She stared at him, her mouth hanging open. Slowly, it closed. Her brows descended. She grabbed Milo's arm. "You little rat! What do you think you are, some kind of a damned *spy?* You were listening in on me and the doctor, weren't you? You knew the whole time, didn't you?"

"*You're* a shapeshifter, too," Milo said, "you and Devore! What do you want from me?"

"God damn you, Milo! What is it with you? You think I want to hurt you? You think I want to use you? What the hell do I need you for? I'm rich as fucking Croesus!"

"You *already* used me, Sylvie. You nearly got me killed. Why?"

"I needed some money, damn it, that's all. And *you're* the one who nearly got you killed. You stabbed yourself, for pity's sake! It was a simple setup. Failsafe!"

"You blew the borders, Sylvie. The guy said they were fuzzy."

"Well, it couldn't be *perfect,* could it? The guy would think it was regular dough. You think you could do better?"

Milo knew fifty-dollar bills pretty well. Sylvie insisted on cash from her puppet show patrons, and Milo had been doing most of the collecting lately. They often paid with a fifty, which was a headache for Sylvie to break, but easy for the sponsors to carry. In his mind, Milo could see a fifty dollar bill as clearly as he could see his own hand. He could *look* right through it and all around it, on both sides. He felt the pattern of ink on its surface as if it were a network of varicose veins. He felt the rough surface like a hairy pelt, like his own hairy pelt.

Suddenly, he felt the sheets collapse around him, his skin shrivel and im-

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plode. He felt as if he were becoming all tongue, and the tongue was sucking an unripe fruit that sucked back at him, drying him out till he winked out of existence entirely. It was very quiet, very dark, very still. *Milo* was gone. There was only a vague *electricity,* a tension, slight at first, but it became more and more irritating, until it was unbearable. Then he burst into mundane awareness again, like a frogman bursting above the surface, gasping, shocked by the sudden light and air.

"Damn you," Sylvie was saying. "Don't you ever, *ever* do that again."

"Don't tell him *that,*" a low voice said from behind Sylvie. A door had opened. Light poured in. Someone was walking in, silhouetted in the doorway. Milo could see only that he was a small man and, from the light flashing from his head, that he wore glasses. "His father told him that once. He won't like to hear that, will you, Milo? Tell the truth now, Sylvie. Was he any good?"

Sylvie was fuming. She swallowed. She breathed. She calmed herself for the small man's sake. "He's fabulous. I've never seen anything like it."

"That's what I figured." The man came closer and put his hand on Sylvie's shoulder. "You know who I am, don't you, Milo?"

"Sure," Milo said. "You're Dr. Devore."

"That's right, Milo. I don't know much *materia medica* any more, but I can still do first aid okay. How's the belly?"

"I'm all right. Do you own *The Grass and Trees?*"

"You're a smart boy, Milo. We don't want to hurt you. We don't want to use you. In fact, it's exactly the opposite, you know?"

Now he made out the drapes, the rolltop, the chairs he lay on. "I jumped out that window. I was a bat. I flew down."

"I didn't expect that," Devore said. "I didn't know you were still here. I wasn't in a position to know *anything* at that moment."

"The doctor was a *rainbow,*" Sylvie said.

Devore clucked his tongue. "Ach! My small talent!"

"But you called Sylvie," Milo said.

"Yes, I had already called her to tell her about you, you know? She was on her way here when she saw you fly down. She improvised."

Milo started to tremble. He shut his eyes, then forced them open again. "Sylvie, Dr. Devore, there's something I remembered from a long time ago . . ."

Devore cut in, "You don't have to tell us this, Milo. You don't have to say anything you're not ready to say . . ."

"I killed my sister. I killed Dede." He began to sob.

Sylvie kissed him on the forehead and cradled his head in her arms. "It wasn't you, little man. It was a mountain lion. You were a little boy! You couldn't control it! You didn't know anything! Dede was an *operator!* She would have used you up and thrown you away like an old Kleenex!"

Devore spoke in his low, soothing voice, the voice that held Milo just this side of panic when he retold his dreams. "We knew, Milo. All that talking in your sleep! We followed the leads. We traced your history, well, up until you disappeared, after your sister's death.

"Milo, you were no more at fault for Dede's death than you were for wrecking that car in your dream about the dumpster. For a child as young as you were then, shapeshifting is the same as dreaming, you know? It's all make-believe!"

"She was my big sister! She took care of me!" Milo's face, like his throat, was tightening into a knot. "She read to me. She tucked me in at night."

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Sylvie shook her head. "Milo! Milo!"

All at once, it was too much—the arch of Sylvie's brow, Dr. Devore's sad smile, the sweet warmth of Sylvie's hand stroking his head. Milo braved the pain in his stomach and bolted upright. "I'm no good! I'm some kind of monster, is all! You don't understand!"

Sylvie tried to hold him, but he swung his legs over the side of the makeshift bed and pulled away from her. He flinched and started to double over, then braced himself and ran to the window, clutching the sheet about him. Devore followed him.

Milo pressed his forehead against the glass. "She wanted me to kill that guy. It wasn't the first time. The guy wouldn't do what she wanted. I was the only one who always did what she wanted—except just that once. I didn't mean to kill her, though!"

"You didn't kill her, you jerk!" Sylvie was crying too now. "It was the goddamn mountain lion, Milo! It wasn't your fault!"

Milo pushed open the window and leaned out. He let his head hang, panting, dripping tears. Tears slid down his nose and cheeks and chin. "I could jump. I deserve it."

Devore's hand on his shoulder. "You already tried that, Milo. Inside you, you're too smart, you're too good to do that to yourself. When you jump, Milo, you fly! In your heart you know you must live. Dede *used* you, Milo. You protected yourself."

"Why are you so good to me? Nobody's ever been so good to me!" He turned around, trusting them to see his face, so ugly, he thought, with tears and spasms of grief.

"We just want to look out for you, Milo." Sylvie cupped his cheek, wet with tears, in the palm of her hand, and all at once his ugliness vanished: he didn't look like anything, he was only this touch, this gazing into Sylvie's gaze. It wasn't a shapeshifter's trick but the most human thing he had ever felt.

"We all look out for one another," she said. "We're all finding out what we are, what we can do."

Like a knot pulled free, Milo's breath shuddered once, then steadied. The sheet wrapped around him opened slightly: his movement had irritated the wound, and blood trickled below the dressing.

"Take a good look, Sylvie," Devore said, "and next time you need pin money, ask me."

"I said I was sorry," she said, "and I meant it. But I can't be told what to do, not by you, not by anybody. I got my own plans, you know. Your fellowship won't take me to Edinburgh for the Fringe Festival or Amsterdam for the Festival of Fools or to the Carnival in Venice or any of those other big venues that are goddam dying to experience the Moon and Stars!" Devore half-smiled, looked down, and shook his head.

Milo blinked. For a split second, Dede was there, pale and doughy. She was lingering in the corner with a hangdog look. She wasn't as big as Milo used to think, nor as subtle. As his big sister, then as a nameless forbidden dream, she had been mighty: volcanoes, oceans, storming skies, or a hot dry wind. Now she was just a shadow. "You used me, Dede! I was just a baby, and you were my big sister! Oh, Dede, you shouldn't have done that! That wasn't right!" Bookish, wan, small-hearted, eaten up by jealousy and desire, she simply faded from view.

Milo had been whispering to himself, he realized. He caught Sylvie and

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Devore's eyes on him; they looked away, embarrassed for him perhaps, but Milo didn't mind that they had heard him. *We all look out for one another,* Sylvie had said. *We!* There were others like him! Milo breathed. Milo breathed. He was *innocent.*

He felt like someone suddenly waking after a long fever and rummaging for food. "Tell me about the painting in the waiting room. Is it . . . *somebody?*"

"Yes," said Devore. "I guess you'd have to say so. At least, she *was* somebody. She seems to be caught in there, like Narcissus staring into the lake. We can't get her back. Maybe she doesn't *want* to come back."

Milo shut his eyes; tears streamed down his cheeks.

Sylvie squeezed his hand. "Milo. . . ?"

"I was caught like that, Sylvie. I belonged to Dede, even though she was dead. She said I'd be all hers forever."

"Milo, you're going to be all *yours* forever," said Devore. "We're going to see to it. We're going to teach you everything. And you're going to teach us, too."

"Yes, I will." Milo took Sylvie's other hand in his. He looked at her, then at Devore, then Sylvie again. He had the extraordinary sensation of recognizing *himself* behind their eyes. "I love you, both of you!" he blurted out.

Sylvie smiled. Her face sparkled so, he thought he was looking at the moon and stars. O

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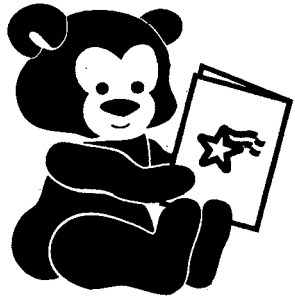

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Kage Baker

TWO OLD MEN

Kage Baker is the author of *In the Garden of Iden* and *Sky Coyote*. She resides in the small coastal town of Pismo Beach, California, where the following story is set. Ms. Baker tells us that the town "is probably no more haunted by gods and demons than any other place . . ."

It was Sunday, January 26, 1961, and Markie Souza was six years old. He sat patiently beside his mother in the long pew, listening to Father Gosse talk about how wonderful it was to have a Catholic in the White House at last. Markie knew this was a good thing, in a general kind of way, because he was a Catholic too; but it was too big and too boring to think about, so he concentrated his attention on wishing his little sister would wake up.

She was limp on his mother's ample shoulder, flushed in the unseasonable heat, and the elastic band that held her straw hat on was edging forward under her chin. Any minute now it was going to ride up and snap her in the nose. Markie saw his opportunity and seized it; he reached up and tugged the band back into place, just incidentally jostling the baby into consciousness. Karen squirmed, turned her head and opened her eyes; she might have closed them again, but just then everybody had to stand up to sing *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum*. The little girl looked around in unbelieving outrage and began to protest. Markie put his arms up to her.

"I'll take her out, Mama," he stage-whispered. His mother gratefully dumped the baby into his arms without missing a note. He staggered out of the pew and up the strip of yellow carpet that led to the side door. There was a little garden out there, a couple of juniper bushes planted around a statue of a lady saint. She was leaning on a broken ship's wheel. It had been explained to Markie that she was the patron saint of sailors and fishermen. Markie's daddy was a fisherman, and when he'd lived with them his mother had burned candles to this saint. Karen's daddy wasn't a fisherman, though, he only cut up fish at the big market on the other side of the harbor, and Markie assumed this was why Mama had stopped buying the little yellow votive candles.

Karen tottered back and forth in front of the statue, and Markie stood with his hands in his pockets, edging between her and the juniper bushes when she seemed likely to fall into them, or between her and the parked cars when she'd make a dash for the asphalt. It was a dumb game, but it was better than sitting inside. Every so often he'd look away from the baby long enough to watch the progress of a big ship that was working its way across the horizon. He wondered if his daddy was on the ship. The baby was quick to make use of an opportunity too, and the second she saw his attention had wandered would bolt down the narrow walkway between the church and the rectory. He would run after her, and the clatter of their hard Sunday shoes would echo between the buildings.

After a while there was singing again and people started filing out of the church, blinking in the light. Markie got a firm grip on Karen's fat wrist

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and held on until Mama emerged, smiling and chatting with a neighbor. Mama was a big lady in a flowered tent dress, blonde and blue-eyed like Karen, and she laughed a lot, jolly and very loud. She cried loud too. She was usually doing one or the other; Mama wasn't quiet much.

She swept up Karen and walked on, deep in her conversation with Mrs. Avila, and Markie followed them down the hill from the church. It was hot and very bright, but the wind was fresh and there were seagulls wheeling and crying above the town. Their shadows floated around Markie on the sidewalk, all the way down Hinds Street to the old highway where the sidewalk ended and the dirt path began. Here the ladies in their Sunday dresses shouted their goodbyes to each other and parted company, and Markie's Mama swung round and began a conversation with him, barely pausing to draw breath.

"Got a letter from Grandpa, honey, and he sent nice presents of money for you and the baby. Looks like you get your birthday after all! What do you want, you want some little cars? You want a holster and a six-shooter like Leon's got? Whatever his damn mother buys him, honey, you can have better!"

"Can I have fishing stuff?" Markie didn't like talking about presents before he got them—it seemed like bad luck, and anyway he liked the idea of a surprise.

"Or I'll get you more of those green soldiers—what? No, honey, we talked about this, remember? You're too little and you'd just get the hooks in your fingers. Wait till you're older and Ronnie can show you." Ronnie was Karen's daddy. Markie didn't want to go fishing with Ronnie; Ronnie scared him. Markie just put his head down and walked along beside Mama as she talked on and on, making plans about all the wonderful things he and Ronnie would do together when he was older. She was loud enough to be heard above the cars that zoomed past them on the highway, and when they turned off the trail and crossed the bridge over the slough her voice echoed off the water. As they neared their house, she saw Mrs. O'Farrell hanging out a laundry load, and hurried ahead to tell her something important. Markie got to walk the rest of the way by himself.

Their house was the third one from the end in a half-square of little yellow cottages around a central courtyard. It had been a motor court, once; the rusted neon sign still said it was, but families like Markie's paid by the week to live here year in and year out. It was a nice place to live. Beside each identical clapboard house was a crushed-shell driveway with an old car or truck parked in it, and behind each house was a clothesline. In front was a spreading lawn of Bermuda grass, lush and nearly indestructible, and beyond that low dunes rose, and just beyond them was the sea. Off to the south was a dark forest of eucalyptus trees, and when Markie had been younger he'd been afraid of the monster that howled there; now he knew it was just the freight train, he'd seen where its tracks ran. To the north was the campground, where the people with big silver trailers pulled in; then the bridge that crossed the slough, and the little town with its pier and its general store and hotels.

It was a good world, and Markie was in a hurry to get back to it. He had to change his clothes first, though, and he didn't like going into the house by himself; but Mama looked like she was going to be talking to Mrs. O'Farrell a while, so he was careful not to let the rusty screen bang behind him as he slipped inside.

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Ronnie was awake, though, sitting up in bed and smoking. He watched Markie with dead eyes as Markie hurried past the bedroom door. He didn't say anything, for which Markie was grateful. Ronnie was mean when he had that look in his eyes.

Markie's room was a tiny alcove up two stairs, with his bed and a dresser. He shed the blue church suit and the hard shoes, and quickly pulled on a pair of shorts and a cotton shirt. Groping under the bed he found his knapsack. His father had bought it at an Army Surplus store and it had an austere moldy smell, like old wars. He loved it. He put it on, adjusting the straps carefully, and ran from the house.

"Bye, Ma," he shouted as he ran past, and she waved vaguely as she continued telling Mrs. O'Farrell about the fight the people in the next house had had. Markie made for the big state campground; it was the place he always started his search.

There were certain places you could always find pop bottles. Ditches by the side of highways, for example: people pitched the bottles out of speeding cars. In fact a lot of interesting stuff wound up in ditches. Bottles got left in alleyways between houses, and in phone booths, and in flower planters where the flowers had died, and in bushes on the edges of parking lots. The very best place to look was at the campground, just after one of the big silver trailers had pulled away from a space, before the park attendant had emptied the trash can. Beer bottles were worthless, but an ordinary pop bottle was worth two cents on deposit, and the big Par-T-Pak bottles were worth a nickel. Five empty Coca-Cola bottles could be redeemed for ten cents, and ten cents bought a comic book or a soda, or two candy bars—three if you went to Hatta's News, Cigars, and Sundries, which carried three-cent Polar Bars. Ten cents bought two rolls of Lifesavers or one box of Crackerjacks, or ten Red Vines, or five Tootsie Roll Pops. Markie knew to the penny what he could do with his money, all right.

The original point of getting the money, though, had been to hand it to Mama in triumph. For a moment he'd completely have her attention, even if she were talking with the other women in the court; she'd yell out that he was her little hero, and engulf him in a hug, and briefly things would be the way they'd been before Karen had been born. Lately this had begun to lose its appeal to him, but the hunt had become more interesting as he got older and better at it, and then one day an idea had hit him like a blow between the eyes—buried treasure! He could save all those dimes in a box and keep it buried somewhere. He was still incredulous at how long it had taken him to think of this, especially since he lived at the beach, which was where people buried treasure.

He thought seriously about this as he scuttled between the campsites, scoring a Bireley's bottle from one trash can and two Frostie Rootbeer bottles from another. The Playtime Arcade had little treasure chests you could buy with blue tickets, real plastic ones with tiny brass locks, but he was too little to play the games that gave out blue tickets and scared to go in the arcades anyway. Well, there were cigar boxes and glass jars and tin cans; any of those might do for a start.

He spotted a good-sized cache of Nehi bottles at one campsite, but the campers were still there; an elderly man and woman seated in folding chairs, talking sadly and interminably about something. He decided to go into the dunes a while, to give them time to leave. Sometimes people wandered into the dunes with pop bottles, too, though usually all there was to

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find there were beer bottles or little whiskey bottles in screwed-up paper bags. Once in a while the sand would drift away from old, old bottles, purple from time and the sun, and those could be sold to the old lady who ran the junk shop on Cypress Street. She'd pay ten cents per bottle, very good money.

So he struggled through the willow thicket, which was swampy and buzzing with little flies, and emerged into the cooler air of the dunes. Trails wound here through the sand, between the lawns of dune grass and big leaning yellow flowers. He knew all the labyrinths between the rows of cypress or eucalyptus trees that had been planted there, a long time ago, when somebody had built a big hotel on the sands. There was a story that one night a storm had come up and blown away the big dune from under the hotel, and the hotel had tipped over like a wrecked ship in the sand. Sometimes the winter storms would blow away enough sand to uncover some of the lost stuff from long ago: old machinery, a grand piano, a box of letters, a Model T Ford.

All the last storm seemed to have uncovered was clamshells. He wandered out from the edge into the full sunlight and the sea wind blew his hair back from his forehead. It was funny: he couldn't hear the waves at all, though they were crashing white with the spray thrown back from their tops. He couldn't hear any sound, though there were little kids playing at the edge of the water, and their mouths were opening as they yelled to one another. He looked around him in confusion.

He was in the place at the edge of the dunes where the trees had died, a long time ago, and they were leafless and silver from fifty years of salt spray, with their silver branches still swept backward from the winds when they were alive. There was a little line of bright water running in a low place beyond the edge, with some green reeds and a big white bird with a crest standing motionless, or moving its neck to strike at a silver fish or a frog. On the other side of the water the high dunes started, the big mountains of sand where there were no trees, only the sand changing color, white or pink or pale gold, and the sky and the pale floating clouds and their shadows on the sand. That was where the old man was sitting. He was looking at Markie.

"Come here, boy," he said, and his voice was so loud in the silence Markie jumped. But he came, at least as far as the edge of the water. The white bird ignored him. The old man was all in white, a long robe like saints wore, and his hair and beard were long and white too. His eyes were as scary as Ronnie's eyes.

"I want you to run an errand for me, boy," he said. His voice was scary, too.

"Okay," said Markie.

"Go into the town, to the arcade with the yellow sign. Ask for Smith."

"Okay," said Markie, though he was scared to go inside the arcades.

"Give him a message for me. Ask him how he likes this new servant of mine. Say to him: My servant has set himself to feed and clothe the poor, and to break the shackles of the oppressed, and to exalt the wise even to the stars. He has invoked the names of the old kings and the days of righteousness. Why should he not succeed? You go to Smith, boy, and you ask him just that. And go along the beach, it'll be faster. Do it, boy."

"Okay," said Markie, and he turned and fled. He made no sound floundering through the hot sand, but as he got to the hard wet sand there was

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noise again: the roar of the surf, the happy screaming of the little kids playing in the water. He ran up the beach toward the town and never looked back once.

By the time he reached the town and climbed up the ramp from the beach, he had decided to turn in his pop bottles at Hatta's and go home along the state highway. Just as he'd made up his mind on this, however, he passed the yard where the Andersons' big dog slept on its tether, in the shade under a boat up on sawhorses. The dog woke and leapt up barking, as it often did; but to Markie's horror the tether snapped, and the dog came flying over the fence and landed sprawling, right behind him. Markie ran so fast, jolting along the hot sidewalk, that a bottle flew out of his knapsack and broke. The dog stopped, booming out furious threats, but Markie kept going until he got around the corner onto Cypress Street and felt it was safe to slow down.

"Okay," he gasped, "Okay. I'm just going to turn in my bottles and *then* I'm going to the arcade, okay?"

There was a rumble like thunder, but it was only somebody starting up a motorcycle in front of Harry's Bar.

Markie limped into Hatta's News, Cigars, and Sundries, grateful for the cool linoleum under his feet. Mr. Hatta wasn't there; only sulky Mary Beth Hatta, who had lately started wearing lipstick. She barely looked up from her copy of *Calling All Girls* as he made his way back to the counter. "Deposit on bottles," he mumbled, sliding his pack off and setting the bottles out one by one.

She gave a martyred sigh. "Eight cents," she told him, and opened the cash register and counted a nickel and three pennies into his sweaty palm. On his way out he slowed longingly by the comic book rack, but her voice came sharply after him:

"If you're not going to buy one of those, don't read them!"

Ordinarily he'd have turned and responded in kind, lifting the tip of his nose or maybe the corners of his eyes up with his fingers; but he remembered the old man in the dunes and it made him feel cold all over, so he hurried out without word or gesture.

At the corner of Pomeroy Avenue he turned and stared worriedly down the street. This was the Bad Part of town. There on the corner was the Peppermint Twist Lounge, and beyond it was the Red Rooster Pool Room, and beyond that the Roseland Ballroom, where fights broke out every Saturday night. Further down toward the pier were the penny arcades; Playland, with its red sign, and the other one with no name. Its yellow sign just said ARCADE.

Markie wasn't ever supposed to go over here, but he had. For a while after his daddy had moved out Markie had been able to see him by walking past the Red Rooster, looking quickly in through the door into the darkness. His daddy would be at the back, leaning listlessly against the wall with a beer bottle or a pool cue in his hand. If he saw Markie he'd look mad, and Markie would run; but one day his daddy hadn't been there any more, nor had he been there since.

Markie looked in, all the same, as he trotted down the street. No daddy. Markie kept going, all the way down the street, to stand at last outside the doors of the arcade with the yellow sign. He drew a deep breath and went in.

The minute he crossed the threshold into darkness, he wanted to clap his

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hands over his ears. It was the loudest place he'd ever heard. In a corner there was a jukebox booming, telling him hoarsely that Frankie and Johnny were lovers. Next to that was a glass booth in which a marionette clown jiggled, and as its wooden jaw bobbed up and down a falsetto recording of "The Farmer in the Dell" played nearly as loud as the jukebox. From the back came the monotonous thunder of the skee-ball lanes, and the staccato popping of the shooting gallery: somebody had trapped the grizzly bear in his sights and it stood and turned, stood and turned, bellowing its pain as the ducks and rabbits kept racing by. There were pinball machines ringing and buzzing, with now and then a hollow double knock as a game ended, and a shout of disgust as a player punched a machine or rattled it on its legs. In a booth fixed up with a seat and steering wheel, somebody was flying as grey newsreel skies from the last World War flickered in front of him, and the drone of bomber engines played from a speaker. There were big boys standing around, with slicked-back hair and cigarettes, and some of them were shouting to each other; most of them were silent at their games, though, and dead-eyed as the waxen lady in the booth who swung one arm in a slow arc along her fan of playing cards.

Markie stood shivering. Big boys were scary. If you were lucky they ignored you or just flicked their cigarette butts at you, but sometimes they winked at their friends and grabbed you by the arm and said, Hey, Shrimp, C'mere, and then they told you jokes you couldn't understand or asked you questions you couldn't answer, and then everybody would laugh at you. He turned to run outside again, but at that moment a car backfired right outside the door; with a little yelp he ran forward into the gloom.

Then he had to keep going, so he pretended he'd meant to come in there all along, and made for a small machine with a viewscope low enough for him to reach. Silver letters on a red background read IN THE DAYS OF THE INQUISITION. He didn't know what the last word was, but underneath it in smaller letters were the words *One Cent*, so he dug in his pocket for a penny and dropped it in the slot, and looked through the little window.

Clunk, a shutter dropped, and by yellow electric light he saw a tiny mannequin with its head on a block. Whack, another mannequin all in black dropped a tiny ax on its neck, as a third mannequin robed in brown burlap bobbed back and forth in a parody of prayer. The head, no bigger than a pencil eraser, dropped into a tiny basket; just before the light went out Markie could see the head coming back up again on a thread, to snap into place until the next penny was dropped into the slot.

Markie stepped back and looked around. There were other penny machines in this part of the arcade, with titles like SEE YOURSELF AS OTHERS SEE YOU and THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE. He felt in his pocket for more pennies, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him; in all the noise he'd been unable to hear any approach. He turned and stared up at someone very tall, whose face was hideous with lumps and pits and sores.

"Whatcha lookin' for, peanut?" the person shouted.

"Are you Smith?" Markie shouted back. "I got to say something to Smith."

The person jerked a thumb behind him. "Downstairs," he told Markie. Markie followed the direction of the thumb and found himself descending into darkness on a carpeted ramp, booming hollowly under his feet, that led to a long low room. It was a little quieter down here. There were dim islands of light over pool tables, and more dead-eyed boys leaned by them, motionless until an arm would suddenly flash with movement, shoving a cuestick

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forward. Markie was too short to see the colored balls rolling on the table, but he could hear the quiet clicking and the rumble as they dropped into darkness.

At the back of the room were more pinball machines, brightly lit up, and these did not feature little race horses or playing cards, like the ones upstairs; instead there were naked ladies and leering magicians. There was an old man seated between two of them, resting his arms on the glass panels. Markie approached cautiously.

This was a wizened old man, heavily tattooed, in old jeans and a T-shirt colorless with dust. The dust seemed to be grained in his skin and thick in his hair and straggly beard. He wore pointed snakeskin boots and a change belt full of nickels, and he was smoking a cigarette. His eyes were heavy-lidded and bored.

"Are you Smith?" Markie asked him. The old man's eyes flickered over him.

"Sure," he replied. It was hard to hear him, so Markie edged closer.

"I talked to this other man, and he said I was supposed to tell you something," he said, loudly, as though the old man were deaf. Smith took a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled. It smelled really bad. Markie edged back a pace or two.

"Oh yeah?" Smith studied his cigarette thoughtfully. "So what's he got to say to me, kid? He bitching about something again?"

"No, he says—" Markie scratched a mosquito bite, trying to remember. "He wants to know how you like his new servant, the one that breaks chains and stuff. He says he talks about old kings and rightness? You know? And he wants to know why he shouldn't, um, s—s-succeed."

"He does, huh?" Smith stuck his cigarette behind one ear and scratched his beard. "Huh. He's baiting me again, isn't he? Jeeze, whyn't he ever leave well enough alone? Okay. Why shouldn't this servant succeed?" He removed the cigarette and puffed again, then stabbed the air with it decisively. "*Here's* why. His father was unrighteous, and his sins are visited on his kids, right, unto the third and fourth generation? Aren't those the rules? So there, that's one reason. And this man is an adulterer and lusts after the flesh, right? Reason Number Two. Hmmm . . ." Smith pondered a moment; then his eyes lit up. "And when his son was born dead he despaired in his heart! Sin, Sin, and Sin again. That's why his big-shot servant should fail, and you can tell him so from me. Okay, kid? Now beat it."

Markie turned and ran, up the ramp and out through shrieking darkness, and into the clean daylight at the foot of the pier. He pounded to a stop beside the snack stand and caught his breath, looking back fearfully at the arcade. After a moment he wandered out on the pier and looked south toward the dunes. They seemed far away and full of strange shifting lights. He shrugged and ventured further along the pier, stopping to watch with interest as a fisherman reeled in a perch and gutted it there on the spot. There were four telescopes ranged along the pier at intervals, and he stopped and climbed the iron steps to look into the eyepiece of each one, and check the coin slot to see if anyone had jammed a dime in there; no such luck. Further on, he stopped at the bait stand and bought a bag of peanuts for five cents. Just beyond the bait stand was a bench with a clean spot, and he settled down and proceeded to eat the peanuts, dropping the shells through the gaps between the pier planks and watching the green water surge down below.

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The last shell felt funny and light, and when he opened it he found inside a little slip of paper printed in red ink. GET GOING, it said.

He jumped up and ran, heart in mouth, and clattered down the stairway to the beach. Near the bottom of the ramp he had to slow down, hobbling along clutching at his side, but he was too scared to stop.

All the way down the beach he watched the place with the silver trees, and he couldn't see the old man's white robes anywhere. The same little kids were still playing on the sand, though, and when he put down his head and plodded across the soft sand the same silence fell over everything; so he was not really much surprised, coming to the foot of the first dune, to lift his head and see the old man leaning against one of the dead trees.

"All right, boy, tell me what his answer was," said the old man without preamble.

Markie gulped for air and nodded. "He says—your servant should be failed because of his father, and the rule about the two and three generations. And he's committed adultery about the flesh, and his son died, and that's why." Markie sank down on the sand, stretching out his tired legs. The old man put his head on one side and stared fixedly into space for a moment.

"Hmm," he said. "Point taken. Very well. Go back and find Smith. Tell him he may therefore afflict my servant with wasting disease, and set scandal to defile his good name; and yet further, that he may confound his judgment among the nations. Go, boy, and tell him that."

Markie didn't want to go anywhere, and he was just tired enough to open his mouth in protest; but before he could make a sound he felt the soft sand begin to run and sink under him, and in terror he scrambled away on all fours. It didn't seem wise not to keep going once he'd started, so once he reached the hard sand he got to his feet and limped away down the beach, muttering to himself.

He left the beach and had started up the ramp at Ocean View Avenue before he remembered that the Andersons' dog was loose. Turning, he picked his way along the top of the seawall, balancing precariously and stepping around the loose bricks. Jumping from the end, he wandered through the courtyard of another small motel, pausing to duck into its row of phone booths and carefully checking to see if any change had been left in the Coin Return compartment. If none had, sometimes a punch at the Coin Return lever sent a couple of nickels cascading down; this was another good way to get money. The third booth rewarded his efforts mightily. Not only did he coax a nickel out of the phone, somebody had dropped a dime and it had fallen and stuck between the booth's ventilation slits near the floor. Markie's fingers were little enough to prise it out. He pocketed his small fortune and strolled on along the seafront, feeling pleased with himself.

At the snackbar at the foot of the pier he paused and bought a bottle of Seven-Up. The laconic counterman took off the bottlecap for him and thrust a straw down the neck. Markie carried the bottle carefully to the railings above the sand and sat with his legs dangling through the rails, sipping and not thinking. When the bottle was empty he held it up to his eye like a telescope and surveyed the world, emerald green, full of uncertain shapes. The view absorbed him for a while. He was pulled back to earth by the sound of shouting. One of the shouting voices belonged to Ronnie. Markie scrambled back from the railings and turned around quickly.

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Ronnie and another man were over in the parking lot, standing one on either side of a big red and white convertible, yelling across it at one another.

"You were drunk!" the other man was telling Ronnie.

"*Fuck* you!" Ronnie told the man. "I haven't had a drink in two years! Fuck you!"

"Oh, that's some great way to talk when you want your job back," the man laughed harshly, pulling open the car door and getting inside. "It sure is. So you haven't had a drink in two years? So what exactly was that you puked up all over Unit Three, you goddam bum?" He slammed the door and started up his car.

"Come on, man!" Ronnie caught hold of the car door. "You can't do this! I've got an old lady and a kid, for Christ's sake!" But the man was backing up his car, shaking his head, and as he drove away uptown Ronnie ran after him, yelling pleas and threats.

Markie slunk into the arcade, and for a moment the din was almost welcome; at least nobody was fighting in there. He squared his shoulders and marched down the ramp, down into the room where there was no day or night.

Smith was waiting for him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. His cigarette was canted up under his nose at a jaunty angle.

"You deliver my answer, kid?" he inquired. Markie nodded. Smith leaned back and exhaled slowly, two long jets of smoke issuing from his nose. He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them his attention was riveted on Markie, suddenly interested. "Hey. What's your name, kid?"

"Markie Souza."

"Souza, huh?" Smith narrowed his eyes and pulled at his beard. "So you're a Portugee, huh? Boy, your people have been cheated by some experts. You know it was the Portuguese who discovered the New World really? And a lot of other places, too. They never get credit for it, though. The Spanish and the Italians grabbed all the glory for themselves. Your people used to have a big empire, kid, did you know that? And it was all stolen from them. Mostly by the English, but the Spanish had a hand in that too. Next time you see some Mexican kid, you ought to bounce a rock off his head. You aren't all Portuguese, though, are you, with that skin?" Smith leaned forward again, studying Markie. "What are you? What's your mother, kid?"

"She's Irish," Markie told him.

"Well, Irish!" Smith grinned hugely. His teeth were yellow and long. "Talk about a people with good reasons to hate! Kid, I could sit here for three days and three nights telling you about the injustices done to the Irish. You got some scores to settle, kid, you can't grow up fast enough. Any time you want to know about Irish history, you just come down here and ask me."

"Okay," said Markie faintly. The smoke was making him sick. "But the man said to tell you some other stuff."

"What'd he say?"

"That you can do bad things to his servant. Waste and disease, and, uh, scandal. And something about confining his judgment of nations."

"All right," Smith nodded. "All right, that's fair. Will do." He made a circle out of his thumb and index finger and held it up in an affirmative gesture. "But . . . ask him if he doesn't think we ought to up the ante a little. So what if I punish one sinner with good intentions? He's the leader of a whole peo-

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ple, right? Aren't all his people jumping on his little bandwagon with their Camelot and all that bullshit? But how seriously do they believe in what they're saying? Shouldn't they be tested too?"

Markie didn't know what to say, so he nodded in agreement. Smith stuck his cigarette back between his teeth and laced his gnarled fingers together, popping the knuckles.

"O-kay! We got a whole nation suddenly figuring out that racial injustice is bad, and poverty is bad, and reaching for the stars is good, right? Except they damn well knew that already, they just didn't bother to do anything about it until a pretty boy in the White House announced that righting all wrongs is going to be the latest thing. *Fashion*, that's the only reason they care now. So what'll they do if this servant of his is taken out of the picture? My bet is, they won't have the guts to hang on to those high ideals without a figurehead. What's he want to bet? You go ask him, kid. Does he want to test these people?"

Markie nodded and ran. It was a lot to remember and the words kept turning in his head. He emerged into the brilliant sunlight and stood, dazzled, until he realized that he was still clutching the empty Seven-Up bottle. With a purposeful trot he started up Pomeroy Avenue. The phone booth behind the Peppermint Twist lounge yielded a Nesbitts bottle, and there were two Coca-Cola bottles in the high grass next to the Chinese restaurant, and three pennies lying on the sidewalk in plain view right in front of the Wigwam Motor Inn. He was panting with triumph as he marched into Hatta's, and the cool green linoleum felt good under his bare feet. He lined the bottles up on the counter. Mary Beth looked up from her magazine. She was reading *Hit Parade* now.

"Eight cents," she announced. "Are you ever going to buy anything in here, junior?"

"Okay," he said cheerfully, and moved down the counter to the candy display next to the big humidor. The front of the display case was tin rolls of Lifesavers, carefully enameled to look like the real thing. He pretended to grab up a roll of Butter Rum and tugged in feigned surprise when it remained riveted in place. The patience in Mary Beth's eyes was withering, so he stopped playing and picked out five wax tubes filled with colored juice. Mary Beth gave him his three cents in change and took up her magazine again. He stepped out on the hot pavement and hurried down to the beach.

There was supposed to be a way to bite holes in the wax tubes and play music, once you'd sucked out the sweet juice. All the way down the beach he experimented without success, and his teeth were full of wax by the time he looked up and noticed that he'd reached the silver trees again. He plodded across the sand. The old man was standing by the little stream, watching in silence as the big white bird speared a kicking frog.

"Tell me what he said this time," said the old man, without looking up.

"He said Okay," Markie replied, staring at the dying frog in fascination. "And he wants to bet with you about the people with Camelot and everything. And Fashion. He says, what if the man gets taken out of the picture. You want to test them? I think that was what he said."

"A test!" The old man looked up sharply. "Yes! Very well. Let it be done as he has said; let the people be tested. When he has done unto my servant as I have permitted, let him do more. Let him find a murderer; that man's heart shall I harden, that he may strike down my servant. Let the wife be a

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widow; let the children weep for their father, and his people mourn. Will they bury righteousness with my servant, and return to their old ways? Or will they be strong in the faith and make his good works live after him? We'll see, won't we? Go back to Smith, boy. Tell him that."

"Okay," Markie turned and plodded away across the sand. His legs were getting tired. He needed more sugar.

He stopped in at Hatta's on his way back down Cypress Street. Mary Beth looked up at him in real annoyance, but he dug a nickel and five pennies out of his pocket and smacked them down on the counter.

"I'm *buying* something, ha ha ha," he announced, and after a great deal of forethought selected a Mars Bar. As he wandered back down Pomeroy he ate the bar in layers, scraping away the nougat with his teeth and crunching up the almonds in their pavement of hard chocolate. When the candy was gone you could always chew on the green waxed paper wrapper, which tasted nice and felt interesting between the teeth. He was still chewing on it when he passed the Red Rooster and spotted Ronnie inside, ghastly pale under a cone of artificial light, leaning over a green table and cursing as his shot went wrong. Markie gulped and ran.

Down in the underground room, Smith was watching a fly circle in the motionless air. As Markie approached him, he made a grab for it and missed.

"Shit," he said tonelessly. He noticed Markie and grinned again.

"Well, kid? Did he take me up on it?"

Markie nodded and sat down, rubbing his legs. The red carpet felt sticky.

"He says—yes, test. He says he'll let you find a murderer and he'll make his heart hard. He says let his children cry. He says we'll see about the people and faith."

"So *I'm* supposed to get him a murderer?" Smith leaned back. "That figures. I don't have anything else to do, right? So okay, I'll get him his murderer. This is gonna take some work to get it just right . . . but, Hell, I like a challenge. Okay." He unrolled his shirtsleeve and took out a pack of cigarettes, and lit one; Markie didn't see just how, because the cloud of smoke was so immediate and thick. Smith waved it away absently and stared into space a moment, thinking. Markie got up on all fours and staggered to his feet, drawing back Smith's attention.

"I bet he's not paying you anything to run all these messages, is he?" Smith inquired. "Hasn't even offered, huh?"

"Nope," Markie sighed.

"That's him all over. Well, kid, here's something for you." Smith leaned down and fished out something from a brown paper bag under his stool. He held up a brown bottle. "Beer! Big kids like beer."

Markie backed away a pace, staring at it. Ronnie had made him taste some beer once; he had cried and spit it out. "No, thank you," he said.

"No? Nobody'll know. Come on, kid, you must be thirsty, the way he's made you run around." Smith held it out. Markie just shook his head. Smith's eyes got narrow and small, but he smiled his yellow smile again.

"You sure? Well, it's yours anyhow, you've earned it. What do you want me to do with it?"

Markie shrugged.

"You want me to give it to somebody else?" Smith persisted. "Okay? What if I give it to the first guy I meet when I go home tonight, huh, kid? Can I do that?"

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"Okay," Markie agreed.

"Well, okay then! Now go deliver my message. Tell him I'll get him his murderer. Go on, kid, make tracks!"

Markie turned and limped out. He went slowly down the stairs to the beach, holding on to the sticky metal handrail. It was late afternoon now and a chilly wind had come up; all along the beach families were beginning to pack up to go home, closing their striped umbrellas and collecting buckets and sand spades. Mothers were forcing hooded sweatshirts on protesting toddlers and fathers were carrying towels and beach chairs back to station wagons. The tide was out; as Markie trudged along shivering he saw the keyholes in the sand that meant big clams were under there. Ordinarily he'd stop and dig up a few, groping in the sand with his toes; he was too tired this afternoon.

The sun was red and low over the water when he got to the dead trees, and the dunes were all pink. The old man was pacing beside the water, in slow strides like the white bird. He turned his bright glare on Markie.

"He says okay," Markie told him without prompting. "He'll get a murderer."

The old man just nodded. Markie thought about asking the old man for payment of some kind, but one look into the chilly eyes was enough to silence him.

"Now, boy," said the old man briskly, "Another task. Go home and open the topmost drawer of your mother's dresser. You'll find a gun in there. Take it into the bathroom and drop it into the water of the tank behind the toilet. Go now, and let no one see what you've done."

"But I'm not supposed to go in that drawer, ever," Markie protested.

"Do it, boy!" The old man looked so scary Markie turned and ran, stumbling up the face of the dune and back into the thicket. He straggled home, weary and cold.

Mama was sitting on the front steps with two of the other mothers in the courtyard, and they were drinking beers and smoking. Mama was laughing uproariously at something as he approached.

"Hey! Here's my little explorer. Where you been, boyfriend?" she greeted him, carefully tipping her cigarette ash down the neck of an empty beer bottle.

"Hanging around," he replied, stopping and swatting at a mosquito.

"You seen Ronnie?" Mama inquired casually, and the other two mothers gave her a look, with little hard smiles.

"Uh-uh." He threaded his way through them up the steps.

"Well, that's funny, because he was going to give you a ride home if he saw you," Mama replied loudly, with an edge coming into her voice. Markie didn't know what he was supposed to say, so he just shrugged as he opened the screen door.

"He's probably out driving around looking for you," Mama stated. She raised her voice to follow him as he retreated into the dark house. "I don't want to start dinner until he gets back. Whyn't you start your bath? Don't forget you've got school tomorrow,"

"Okay," Markie went into the bathroom and switched on the light. When he saw the toilet, he remembered what he was supposed to do. He crept into Mama's bedroom.

Karen was asleep in the middle of the bed, sprawled with her thumb in her mouth. She did not wake up when he slid the dresser drawer open and stood

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on tiptoe to feel around for the gun. It was at the back, under a fistful of Ronnie's socks. He took it gingerly into the bathroom and lifted the lid of the toilet tank enough to slip it in. It fell with a splash and a clunk, but to his great relief did not shoot a hole in the tank. He turned on the water in the big old claw-footed tub and shook in some bubble flakes. As the tub was filling, he slipped out of his clothes and climbed into the water. All through his bath he half-expected a sudden explosion from the toilet, but none ever came.

When he got out and dressed himself again, the house was still dark. Mama was still outside on the steps, talking with the other ladies. He was hungry, so he padded into the kitchen and made himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and ate it, sitting alone at the kitchen table in the dark. Then he went into his little room and switched on the alcove light. He pulled out the box of comic books from under his bed and lay there a while, looking at the pictures and reading as much as he knew yet of the words.

Later he heard Mama sobbing loudly, and begging the two other mothers to stay with her, and their gentle excuses about having to get home. Heart thudding, he got up and scrambled into his cowboy pajamas, and got under the covers and turned out the light. He lay in a tense knot, listening to her come weeping through the house, bumping into the walls. Was she going to come in and sit on his bed and cry again? No; the noise woke up Karen, who started to scream in the darkness. He heard Mama stumbling into the bedroom, hushing her, heard the creaking springs as she stretched out on the bed beside the baby. Markie relaxed; he was going to be left in peace. Just before he fell asleep, he wondered where Ronnie was.

Ronnie had played badly in the back room of the Red Rooster, all afternoon. He'd come out at last and lingered on the streetcorner, not wanting to have to go home and explain why he wasn't going in to work the next day. As he'd stood there, an old man had come up and pressed a bottle of beer into his hand and walked quickly on, chuckling. Ronnie was too surprised to thank him for the gift, but he was grateful; so he went off and sat on the wall behind the C-Air Motel, sipping his beer and watching the sun go down. From there he went straight into Harry's Bar and had more, and life was good for a while.

But by the time he crawled into his truck and drove out to the old highway, he was in a bad mood again. He was in a worse mood when he climbed from his truck after it ran into the ditch. As he made his way unsteadily through the darkness, a brilliantly simple solution to his problems occurred to him. It would take care of the truck, the lost job, Peggy and the baby, everything. Even the boy. All their problems over forever, with no fights and no explanations. It seemed like the best idea he'd ever had.

He crept into the house, steadying himself by sliding along the wall. Once in the bedroom he groped around in the dresser drawer for a full two minutes before he realized his gun wasn't in there. Peggy was deeply unconscious on the bed, and didn't hear him. He stood swaying in the darkness, uncertain what to do next. Then he got mad. All right; he'd show them, and they'd be sorry.

So he left the house, falling noisily down the front steps, but nobody heard him or came to ask if he was all right. Growling to himself he got up and staggered out to the woods, and lay down on the train tracks with a certain sense of ceremony. He passed out there, listening to the wind in the leaves and the distant roar of breakers.

The freight train came through about twenty minutes later. O

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Tom Purdom

Tom Purdom's Casanova-like character, Joe Baske, most recently seen cavorting in "Romance in Lunar G"(November 1995), returns to experience . . .

ROMANCE IN EXTENDED TIME

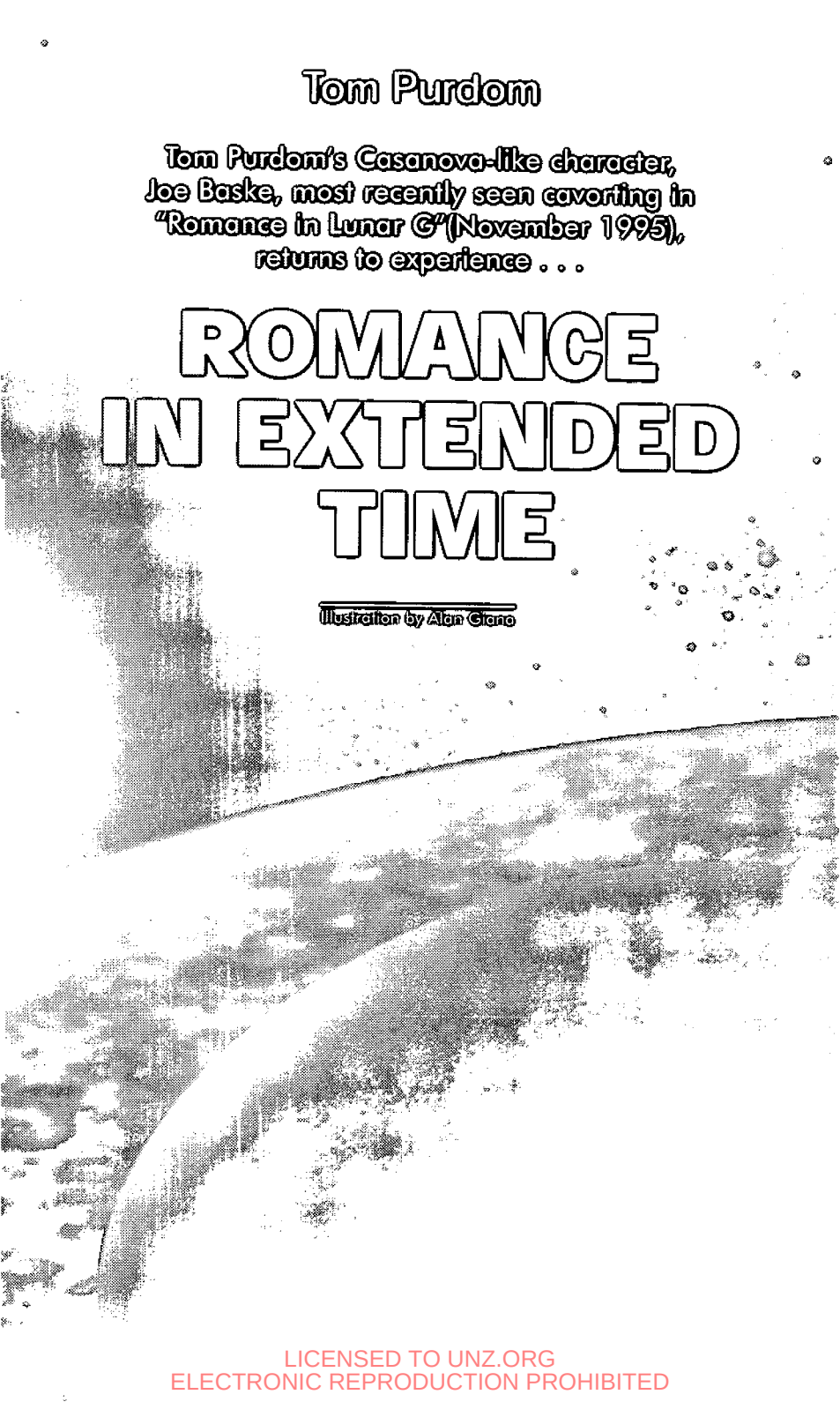

Illustration by Alan Giana

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I didn't hear the three missiles strike when they landed on the rear wheel of our vehicle. The missiles were drops of plastic with just enough mass to make it through the air and they were moving at a relatively low speed—about ninety meters per second, I would guess. On a low-gravity planet like Mercury, a modest muzzle velocity will give you all the range you need for most practical purposes.

At the moment the missiles hit, I was lounging on a reclining chair, under an awning that protected me from bird droppings, falling insects, and other woodland indignities. I was taking some pleasure in the fact that my accommodations were a sizable improvement over the closets spaceships offer their passengers.

I was traveling at a leisurely pace through an idealized temperate-zone forest composed of well spaced, aesthetically varied three-hundred-meter trees. My conveyance had been purchased from an owner who had stocked the refrigerator and the wine chest with a connoisseur's selection of prefabricated food and wine. The fabrication unit situated near the rear wheel had been equipped with programs that could produce several hundred items that were supposed to be just as palatable as the champagne I was currently holding in my hand.

On my left—where I could give it an occasional politely conversational glance—there was a face that displayed an intriguing interplay of two themes: sensuality and alertness. Ling Chime's features were round and fleshy, but her genetic designer had tempered the fleshiness with a sharp nose, high cheekbones, and eyes that seemed to be constantly dancing around the landscape. On my right the Elector—Ling's employer—was dispensing genuinely entertaining gossip about the world of the arts. I was even willing to admit that the Elector was just as attractive as Ling was, in her large-scaled, arm-waving way.

The whole scene was permeated, in addition, with a pleasant touch of the exotic—the light that created peculiar, inconsistent shadows under the trees. The ecodesigners had created a park-like environment, but the light was a constant reminder that the only thing protecting us from the full blast of the sun was a wall that was so thick and milky it diffused the small percentage of the sunlight that slipped past its molecules.

At that time—it was 2089, according to my records—the Mercury habitat was still something of a wonder. On the Moon, people still lived in standalone cities dug into the rims of craters. On Mars, they were still arguing about the rights and wrongs of full scale terraforming. On Mercury, I could peer through the trees and observe the giant towers that supported a globe-circling greenhouse, three kilometers high and twenty kilometers wide. From space the habitat had looked like a thin white band that circled the planet at a sixty degree angle to the equator. Eventually, according to the developers, the urbs built into the towers were supposed to house a billion people.

"My drive wheel has developed structural defects," the car said. "I am instituting repair procedures."

Ling was the Elector's business manager—the factotum who took care of her employer's practical affairs, while the Elector concentrated on the creative efforts she considered the primary purpose of her life. Ling didn't miss a beat as she turned around in her chair and rested her finger on the car's main screen.

"Give us the details," Ling said.

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The car had already slowed to a stop. "The drive wheel has developed three large cracks," the car reported. "Continued stress could result in collapse."

The Elector threw back her head. The electronic bracelets on her left arm flickered and rainbowed as she gestured at the landscape.

"I thought you told us this was a new vehicle, Joseph."

"How long will the repairs take?" Ling asked.

"Approximately ten minutes."

A small, single passenger three-wheeler lurched off the road on our right and bumped across a tree root as it jockeyed past us. The transportation modes lining up behind our rear wheel included riding animals, two-passenger carts, and four hikers who were being followed by a motorized baggage hauler. The "road" was a narrow strip that was covered with a hard mat of surface grass. It had been designed so two vehicles going in opposite directions could just squeeze past each other.

By Mercury standards, the traffic on the road was uncomfortably dense. The high speed vacuum rail had been shut down at the worst possible time. This section of the planet was approaching the beginning of its thousand-hour night. Half the people who lived in this part of the habitat had headed for the forest and a last minute rendezvous with the pleasures of "outdoor life." Now all that recreational traffic had been inflated by the people who had decided to use the road net when the rail system had stopped operating.

Ling had jumped off the car and started examining the rear wheel. Her finger traced one of the cracks. She turned around and peered through the trees. She was wearing a close fitting jacket-and-pants outfit and her businesslike movements accented her slimness.

"My repair system has detected the presence of destructive molecular entities," the car said. "Remedial action is underway."

The Elector's bracelets shimmered again. "Is that thing telling us we're being *attacked?*"

Ling hopped back on the car and bent over the fabrication unit. She ran her hands across the unit's interface and I realized she was searching its external databanks.

"I suppose we shouldn't be surprised," Ling said. "You were willing to come all the way to Mercury just to cast one vote. I suppose we shouldn't be surprised somebody might be willing to engage in a little violence just to stop one vote."

"A little violence!" the Elector orated. "Do you really consider this a *little* violence, Ling? Have you any idea what a clump of those things would have done if they'd landed on one of *us?*"

A red light flashed on top of the fabricator. The time strip on the side of the unit produced a 7:17 and held it.

"There's a car parked around that last bend," Ling said. "You can see it through the trees—right where they could have fired at us. I think there's four people in it."

"And once the repairs are made," I said, "they'll just follow us until they find another spot where they've got a good shot. And hold us up another ten minutes."

Ling gave me a quick glance of approval—the kind of glance that still evokes a foolish rush of pleasure, no matter how many times a woman who's captured my fancy bestows it on me.

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"Are you telling me they merely have to stop us four times?" the Elector said.

Ling pointed at the time strip on the fabricator. "In seven minutes and seventeen seconds we can have our own version of the same kind of weapon they probably used—two minutes to download the fabrication program, five minutes and seventeen seconds to fabricate it. If you'll put your expense program on your notescreen, you can see just how much it will cost you, along with the price of half a dozen smoke bombs. The missiles we'll be firing should be the same type they're using—low impact devices equipped with moles that snip breaks in the long chain molecules that make up the plastic in the wheel. If Joe will give me some help when the time comes, I think we can arrange things so they have to sit around waiting for repairs while we put some distance between us."

The Elector wasn't really called the Elector. That was only a title I had bestowed on her in the privacy of my own mind. Her full name was Katrinka Yamioto Oldaf-Li and the only thing she elected was the winners of a set of ten prizes. The prizes were awarded by an organization called the All-Mercury Coalition of Documented Creative Specialists and they were presented to their proud recipients once every eighty-eight-day Mercury year.

The Elector was a well-known creator of the kind of simulated habitats the less sophisticated members of the human community like to surround themselves with when they're forced to endure a few minutes of inactivity. (Not famous, please note—just well known. There's no reason you should feel culturally deficient if you've never encountered her name before.) I had sampled one of her creations during the voyage to Mercury and it had been the kind of vision I tend to favor—an imaginary world in which people spent their lives dancing in elegant settings and browsing through gardens populated by citizens who dressed themselves with understated (but unmistakable) refinement. She liked clothes that flattered tall, slender men, but that was, from my viewpoint, the only serious flaw in her work.

Citizen Oldaf-Li had been living on Mercury when she had placed her first simulation on the market. She had spent most of the last ten years enjoying the pleasures of the Earth-orbiting cities, but she had maintained her membership in the All-Mercury Coalition of Documented Creative Specialists.

Now she was apparently one of the leaders in a faction that was trying to unseat the current officers. It was hard to believe anyone would spend three months in a spaceship for such a minor cause, but I had learned at a very early age that there were no limits to the absurdities humans would commit once they began joining organizations.

If you look through the databanks, you will find several entries in which journalists and other members of the pseudo-employed compare me to the eighteenth century adventurer Giacomo Casanova. I read all twelve volumes of Casanova's memoirs during a down period in my finances when I was in my sixties. He lived in the eighteenth century and I live in the twenty-first, but we would have given similar answers to certain questions if some time traveling psychologist had bedeviled us with the same personality assessment program. We would both have agreed that sexual encounters are a flat experience if they aren't combined with romantic feelings. We had both decided, at a very young age, that we would spend our lives following the impulses of our hearts. I had been seven years old the first time

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I had been awakened by the strange feelings a member of the other sex could evoke. I had been sixteen—and obsessively fascinated with a woman ten years older—when I had promised myself I would make those feelings the central concern of my life. I didn't want to waste one hour of my life listening to committee reports.

I had boarded the ship as the devoted companion of a flamehaired, amusing woman who was emigrating to Mercury to escape a burdensome grown son. I had believed we could keep each other diverted for the entire ninety-three days we were going to be imprisoned in the ship. Instead, I had discovered that I had exhausted her capacity for entertaining exchanges in the first five days of our liaison. On the forty-first day of the voyage—fifty-two days before we were scheduled to reach Mercury—I had placed my investments under the total control of my alter program and put myself into deep sleep.

And then, five minutes after I trudged through the disembarkation tunnel, while I was still feeling numb and semi-conscious—I turned my head as I maneuvered through the passenger lounge and saw Ling Chime sitting in front of a panoramic screen that displayed the craters and hard shadows of the real Mercury on the other side of the wall. She was sitting at a small, single-pedestal work table and she was staring at her notescreen as if she were planning a move in a championship game tournament.

The Elector had spent most of her time on the ship working at her trade. Ling had been less work oriented but she had spent several hours each ship day superintending the Elector's business interests. I had seen her a few times during the first half of the voyage and her face had always left me with an after-image that floated in my mind for several hours. But that had been all there had been to it.

So why had I responded with such a rush when I had seen Ling sitting in front of the panorama? Had it been the atmosphere created by the hard-shadowed desert behind her? Had it been the fact that she was focusing her entire attention on her notescreen and I was getting my first look at the intense competence she brought to everything she did?

I didn't know. I never would know. I just knew she had ignited the emotion that was, for me, the wine and the salt and the cream of life.

In Ling's case there was a small drawback—as there frequently is. I had picked up some information on Ling's background when I had been exploring the Elector's organizational antics. Ling had earned three doctorates and she still hadn't celebrated her thirty-second birthday.

The age entry had given me a mild shock. I can usually tell people's ages to within twenty years, no matter what they've done to keep their physiology and their appearance in peak condition. A woman of eighty and a woman of twenty-five may look almost exactly alike, but the older person will normally carry herself with an authority and sophistication that can't be simulated. I had watched Ling guide the Elector through one of the mandatory social rituals that had opened the voyage. She had been so self-possessed I had automatically assumed she was at least twice as old as she really was.

There had been a time when the discrepancy in ages wouldn't have troubled me. The older male, younger female pairing is a combination as old as the species. I didn't have any problem with the reverse situation either. When you're in your nineties, the fact that a woman is twenty years older than you doesn't make that much difference.

But that was *my* attitude. It was already becoming obvious some of the younger members of our species were developing a different outlook.

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I have been living with technological upheavals since I was old enough to regard the world with some measure of understanding. I was one of the first people to implant a musical performance system in my nervous system. I've struggled with the possibilities created by personality modification technology. I watched molecular technology flower into a major force after decades in which it looked like it was destined to be one of those tantalizing daydreams that remain permanently out of reach. Nothing, in my opinion, has changed the world more than the ability to modify human genes.

Moles have given us things like personal fabrication units and projects that could circle Mercury with a fully enclosed habitat in six Earth years. Genetic technology changed what we *are*. Ling could awe me with her competence because she had a brain and a nervous system that her parents had ordered for her in exactly the same way I had ordered my clothes. She could remain cool under stress because they had chosen a set of glands that equipped her with that kind of temperament.

So why was someone like Ling working as a personal assistant to someone like the Elector? What did she think when she looked at someone like *me?* Was I just a primitive life form to her? An old man fumbling around the Solar System with an outmoded set of physical components?

The woman who had drawn me to Mercury had been fleeing a son who was six years younger than Ling. Her son apparently believed men and women my age were the ultimate enemy—a group that was going to sit on society and block every channel of advancement for centuries into the future. *I gave him everything I could,* his mother had said. *A forty percent intelligence enhancement. Looks. A coordination component that would have made him a professional athlete when you and I were young. Aggressiveness. And what do I get? A son who tells me I'm as obsolete as a piece of thirty-year-old software.*

The Elector started gesturing and emoting as soon as she realized I was steering myself across the lounge toward Ling's work table. It didn't take me long to find out why Ling was working with such intensity. The Elector had planned to hop out of the orbit-to-surface shuttle and board one of the high speed rail vehicles that raced through the vacuum just outside the habitat. She would arrive, according to her calculations, three hours before the deadline for casting her vote. Unfortunately, the governing body of Mercury—the Conclave of Talents—had once again decided it had to worry about the safety and long term well being of the people it was supposed to serve. The Talents had decided this section of the rail system needed some special maintenance work. It would be six hours before a vehicle glided down the rails.

Ling was looking for a road vehicle the Elector could buy or rent. If she could find one sometime in the next half hour, they could drive past four stations and board a functioning rail vehicle. I watched Ling work at her notescreen while the Elector paced out big circles behind us. Then I slipped away to another table and opened my own notescreen.

My financial program updated its statement on my current worth and I asked it for a list of the current bids for road vehicles. The top bid on the list had been posted by Ling and it had been totally ignored. As I had expected, most of the people who already owned road vehicles weren't interested in selling.

I stared at the figures on my screen. If I doubled Ling's offer, I would be eating up almost 25 percent of the profits my alter had earned for me while I had been asleep. . . .

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Most of the immediate responses came from idlers who apparently thought I was some kind of ignorant off-worlder. Five people advised me I could turn right as I left the disembarkation lounge and find a shop with a large-scale fabrication unit that could produce any vehicle I wanted within five hours.

In case you haven't noticed, one wit expounded, *you're living in a society in which you can have anything you want for the price of a little energy, some cheap raw materials, and a small payment to the people who designed the product and wrote the fabrication program. I realize you've just landed on our planet. But we have more of the civilized conveniences than you may think.*

I said I need it immediately, I replied. *IMMEDIATELY.*

It was a reckless thing to do—an invitation to squeeze me until I strangled. But it brought results. An image of a three-wheeler bounced onto my screen seconds after I finished writing. The list of accessories indicated the owner had been planning a romantic trip of her own. The asking price was 30 percent higher than the amount I had offered.

Ling was still hunting down possibilities when I hurried back to her table. "Please excuse me for interfering in your problems," I said. "I have just been reassessing my own plans. As it happens, I ordered a touring road vehicle before we left Earth. If you would be willing to share my accommodations for the next few hours. . . ."

Ling pulled two sections of a weapon out of the fabrication unit and fitted them together. Her new possession was a practical-looking device with a skinny barrel and a wide, bulky stock.

"There's five smoke bombs in the fabricator, Joe. Can you drop two of them over the side when I give the word? Then tell the car to move. And drop more bombs as you roll."

"I don't think that will put too much stress on my martial capabilities."

"What makes you think they won't fire through the smoke?" the Elector demanded. "They'll still know exactly where we are."

"I'm assuming they're not trying to kill us," Ling said. "They can't fire through the smoke without running the risk they'll hit one of us."

I watched her as she slipped around the front wheels and started working her way through the trees. Fashion was once again going through a period in which clothes and body styles emphasized the classic sexual differentiators. Women were spotlighting their breasts, wearing long skirts, and even draping themselves in the kind of elaborate gowns the Elector favored. Men were developing their shoulder muscles and adopting clothes that drew attention to the results.

It was a development I could support with enthusiasm. What was the point in having two sexes if there wasn't any difference between them? I was too short to look physically impressive but I had grown a beard and put myself through a training program that made me look solid and muscular. Ling had managed to conform to fashion without compromising her ability to function. She had picked clothes that emphasized her litheness and the gracefulness of her movements. Her hair had been cut so it bobbed just above her shoulders.

There have been times—many times, unfortunately—when people have looked at the woman who had currently aroused my interest and wondered why she had paired off with someone like me. In this case, I honestly

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thought we would make an attractive couple. If I could lure Ling away from her employer for a few tendays, we could enjoy an interlude that would be a nice mix of companionship and sensuality. We could follow the temperate zone, perhaps, as it moved around the planet. Or would Ling prefer the kind of long twilight we were currently experiencing?

"Don't you think it might be best if you didn't stare at her?" the Elector said. "Even if they didn't see her leave the car, they might wonder why you're so fixated on that part of the landscape."

I stood up and glanced into the fabricator. Five oval objects had been lined up on a storage shelf.

The car's main screen emitted a trio of discrete trumpet notes. *There's a red activation button on the side of each bomb,* a written message from Ling announced. *You can release the bombs whenever the car tells you the wheel's repaired.*

I examined one of the bombs without pulling it out of the fabricator. The Elector was eyeing me with an ironic smile.

"You have intriguing tastes, Joseph Louis. I have to confess I thought *I* was the one you were interested in."

I shrugged. "My reactions to women are totally unpredictable. I thought about having them modified many years ago. But I decided I'd rather just let them lead me where they will."

"And that's why you've led such an adventurous life?"

"Believe me, it's been much less turbulent than the entries in the databanks indicate. Most of the time, it's just a matter of a few hours with this one, or a few tendays with that one. I'm interested in pleasure, not excitement."

"And how much time are you planning to spend with Ling? I should warn you—we're heading back to civilization ninety-eight hours after I cast my vote."

I stared at her. "You're going to turn right around and pen yourself up in a spaceship for another three months?"

"I can do my kind of work wherever I am. I'm far happier, in fact, when I'm someplace where I don't have to put up with *weather*. I moved into this place two years after it opened and I got tired of hearing people lecture me about it before I'd been here a single Mercury year. Every time we had a rain storm I had to listen to somebody telling me I should be happy I was living in an environment that was so big it could maintain its own cycles *just like the Earth does*. Personally, I'd rather pay the extra rent and live in environments that have to be managed down to the last molecule of air."

"The repairs have been completed," the car said. "I await your orders."

I turned away from her before she could see the gloom that was settling over my face. My hands ripped two bombs out of the fabricator and dropped them onto the road surface. Two red clouds enveloped the car.

I watched the clouds expand along the road. We had been traveling toward the night side of the planet, so the wind inside the habitat was actually blowing in the direction we had been moving. The temperature difference between the night side and the day side could have built up enormous winds inside the habitat, but the engineers had arranged things so the air flow remained mild and steady. The habitat had been designed with several doglegs, and the landscaping had included hills that could act as windbreaks. The trees probably helped, too.

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I ordered the car to resume progress and we edged forward. Puzzled faces stared at me through the fog as two three-wheelers passed us going in the other direction.

The smoke had covered the entire width of the road behind me. I looked back and saw Ling skimming through the mist with the long strides of the expert low-gravity runner. I had spent several tendays mastering that skill when I had first emigrated to the Moon. I wasn't surprised to discover I would never do it as well as she could.

The face on the Elector's notescreen belonged to a man who had adopted a particularly masculine style: a large bald head and a trim, disciplined beard. I had come across several vindictive graphics when I had been browsing through the Elector's political diatribes. I immediately knew I was looking at the current Elected Superintendent of the All-Mercury Coalition of Documented Creative Specialists.

I had spent several hours exploring two of the Elected Superintendent's environments during the voyage. I wouldn't have paid much attention to them normally, but they had been well crafted, and they certainly kept my activity hormones flowing. The Superintendent created fantasy worlds for people who wanted to combat various kinds of imaginary opponents and dispatch various kinds of imaginary animals. In person, he was scrupulously polite. It was the Elector who launched into a tirade ten words after she heard his perfectly modulated greeting.

As I understood it, the officers represented a group that wanted to alter the membership rules of the Coalition. Under the current membership rules, voting members had to produce a certain number of creative works every twenty-five Mercury years. The officers wanted to increase the requirements. They had already managed to limit voting on certain issues to people who were actually physically present on Mercury. They had even decreed that voting members had to establish their right to vote by attending a meeting or paying a personal visit to the elections officer at least once every seven Eyears.

As far as I could determine, the Coalition had only one function: it awarded the All-Mercury prizes for the "finest, most innovative works produced on the First Planet" during the shortest year the laws of physics had bestowed on any rock in the Solar System. The right to vote on the awards seemed to be the sole benefit of membership.

The members of the Elector's faction felt larger principles were involved. As they saw it, their group favored a "broadbased, fully representative" organization that would admit "anyone who had been gifted with the true creative fire." The Superintendent's group was "a ring of audience-pandering would-be oligarchs" determined to "garrote creative minds who have already been asphyxiated by the abuse-by-neglect they have received from the semi-conscious commercial audience."

The Elector didn't quite use language like that. She had too much taste. But the attack on our car had confirmed her belief that the Superintendent was a violent man who catered to the worst human impulses. The Superintendent maintained an expression of calm concern as he stared at her while she ranted.

"Do you really feel we should be wasting time rehashing our differences, Katrinka? It seems to me you should call the police."

"You know very well that if we call the police they'll merely get us in-

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volved in a lot of time consuming questioning. *We are going to arrive on time. I am going to cast my vote.*"

"I hope you will. I wish all our members took their voting privileges as seriously as you do."

"*Voting is not a privilege!* Voting is a *right*. The mere fact that you call it a privilege should tell anyone who cares about social justice everything they need to know."

We had reached the edge of a long, narrow lake while the Elector had been venting her emotions. Ten minutes earlier I might have thought the lake created a picturesque scene. Now, the water looked dark and cold. The complicated shadows the trees cast on the surface looked as sinister as a tract of quicksand.

How could anyone turn around, a third of a tenday after they had made landfall, and go back to the jail cells we had been living in since we had left the Earth-Moon system?

I turned back to the Elector. "Wouldn't you be better off talking to some of the people on your side? It seems to me they could use an attack like this as a propaganda ploy."

Ling gave me another example of those golden looks of approval. I was obviously saying something she had wanted to say herself.

The Elector banished the Superintendent from her notescreen with a wave of her hand—a gesture that would have looked appallingly rude if I hadn't been confident he was probably happy to have the conversation terminated.

"By this time," the Elector said, "everyone who's going to vote has undoubtedly voted."

"Then why bother to vote yourself? Do you really think there's any serious possibility your side could lose by one vote?"

"Ling, will you take manual control of this vehicle and see if you can achieve a little more speed than this parade line we're in is making? If it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Ling settled behind the main control screen. She stared at the menus for approximately twenty seconds—I'm certain it couldn't have been longer—and we swerved out of line and passed four of the vehicles in front of us.

The Elector returned her attention to the semi-intelligent wretch who had questioned the value of her activities. "There are important principles at issue here, Joseph. Some of us feel there is more to life than the pursuit of pleasure."

"You're going to spend a total of six months in a spaceship," I said. "With just half a tenday in a place where you can actually walk around like a human being—"

"No one should object to a minor hardship when they're defending a major cause. It may even help Ling develop a little toughness—she's still getting her first look at the universe, after all."

The Elector eyed me over a mocking smile. She really was an unusual woman. She really believed she was doing something moral and laudable. Yet at the same time she couldn't resist reminding me I was pursuing someone who had been born just after I reached my sixties.

The Elector's smile changed to a look of pure annoyance. I started to respond and then realized she was staring at something in front of our vehicle.

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I turned around and discovered I was regarding the hindquarters of a large gray animal. I had never seen a reduced-scale riding elephant before, but I was familiar with the concept. This one was a little taller than a horse. Its rider was lounging on a top mounted arrangement that looked like a luxury-class acceleration couch.

Ling had tried to move us over to the left, to pass the animal, but it was straddling the center of the road. The elephant's passenger had his hands behind his head and he was lolling back with his chest bared and his eyes on the sky—as if he thought the milky whiteness above the trees could bestow some kind of life-giving radiation on his skin.

He wasn't quite as oblivious of the scene around him as he pretended. He moved to the right, as if he was giving us room, but as soon as he did it we saw there was a car coming toward us in the other lane. As soon as the car passed, the elephant shifted back toward the center.

If he had stopped dead, we could have driven off the road and slipped by him. The Conclave of Talents had established certain rules for vehicles using their roads and they had embedded their dictates in every vehicle's programming. You couldn't exceed forty kilometers an hour and you couldn't drive off the road unless it was blocked by a stationary object.

There were good reasons for such rules. The forest was the source of all the oxygen and organic raw materials available in the habitat. The roads in the forest weren't supposed to be used for routine travel. They had been added to the forest area so people could reach pleasure spots in comfort.

The Talents had shut down part of the rail system because they felt it needed maintenance. They forced cars to stay on the road because they were worried about the maintenance of the habitat's biological life support system. Their obsession with maintenance was a nuisance at the moment, but it would have irritated me more when I had been a self-centered scatterbrain in my twenties and thirties. Overall, it was a good argument for the Mercurians' experiment with a "democracy of limited choice." The Talents had divided into factions and parties, like any other group of politicians, but there were areas in which they had reached an almost unshakable consensus. They had all noted that human societies tend to neglect the long term maintenance of the ecosystems and technological infrastructures that support their way of life.

Ling had already collected a good view of the elephant rider's face and queried the external databanks. My notescreen networked her results and I skimmed through a search summary that advised me the gentleman on the elephant belonged to an extended family of medical designers. The Yan family had built up one of the most successful enterprises on Mercury. They were quartered in a tower just north of us and they made most of their profits designing replacement parts and enhancements.

"Do you mind if I talk to him?" I said. "He seems to have connections—a little diplomacy might be prudent."

"We've already lost enough time dealing with the terrorists our hoodlum friends sent after us," the Elector said. "Do you really feel we should sit here trying to argue with this oaf while they get back in range?"

I leaned over the front of the car and addressed the oaf in my most polished Techno-Mandarin. He gave me the benefit of two or three glances while I entreated with him, but apparently he wasn't in the mood to engage in actual conversation.

There had been a few shouts from the cars behind us when he had start-

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ed playing his little game, but I noticed they had all died down. By now, most of our fellow pilgrims would have had him identified. Apparently, they didn't feel inclined to argue with him.

He looked like a type I had encountered more than once. Those of us who live on the fringes of conventional society tend to run into them. According to the data on my notescreen, his name was Yan Daian and he was the son of one of the more prominent women in his clan. He had been born in 2031—when I had still been ricocheting through my thirties—and he listed his occupation as "lifestyle consultant." He was, in other words, someone who was enjoying an extended adolescence, thanks to the income and social status he acquired from his family connections.

I turned back to the Elector. "Isn't there some kind of law against this kind of behavior?"

"There are certain things our beloved Talents seem to feel we should settle among ourselves. They'll hobble us with a thousand rules designed to protect us from our fondness for so-called short term thinking and refuse to intervene when someone creates a situation they consider a minor inconvenience. They claim they're trying to minimize wasteful legal tangles."

"Maybe we should give him a few minutes of privacy. It's been my experience people like him tend to get tired of their games pretty quickly."

The Elector was standing by the fabricator. She glanced at the time strip and I realized it was ticking off the last seconds of a countdown.

"The Talents think we should deal with these problems on our own, Joseph."

She plunged her hands into the fabricator. Her right arm stretched above her head. A round object arced over the front of our vehicle.

I turned around and saw a thin mist rising from the road surface. The elephant's body sagged as if all that mass of bone and muscle had been transformed into a pile of gray cloth. Its passenger rolled off his seat as his mount settled to the ground.

"Move!" the Elector shouted. "Drive off the road."

Under the rules, we could now leave the road and circle the inanimate object blocking our progress. Unfortunately, the Elector had forgotten the object's cargo might have other ideas.

Yan Daian came out of his roll and crossed the road in a perfectly calculated low gravity jump. He skimmed over the top of his recumbent animal and landed just in front of us, with his arms waving. His face twisted into a mask of outrage. I had realized he was tall and bony when I had seen him reclining on the elephant, but now I could see just how exaggerated his physique was. His height was all in his legs—as if his upper body was mounted on stilts. His legs were at least twenty percent longer than they should have been, given the length of his torso.

The three-wheeler's programming overrode Ling's commands and we eased to a stop. The object dancing in front of us was undeniably mobile.

Ling's face settled into the same focused, businesslike look it had assumed when she had set off through the woods with the gun. She stood up and covered the distance between her and the fabricator in two deliberate, unhurried steps.

Yan Daian was obviously furious but he wasn't trying to communicate his emotions with words. He was just dancing in front of us, deliberately manipulating the programming that was fixing us in place. The Elector was the one who was making all the noise.

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The more I watched that silent figure gyrate, the less I liked the situation. I turned my back on him and stepped up to Ling. "He's not making threats," I murmured. "No threats. No insults. That's not a good sign when somebody has the kind of family he seems to have."

The light on the fabricator interface turned green. Ling reached inside and pulled out a couple of dozen objects that were about the size of her little finger.

"If he's called for help," Ling said, "they're already on the way."

She dropped out of the three-wheeler and I decided to follow her. This wasn't the first time I had watched people fling non-lethal weapons at their adversaries. It's been my experience that non-lethals are the kind of technological marvels that usually work better when they're supported by more primitive techniques.

She stopped to give Yan Daian a warning—the first foolish thing I had seen her do. "These things are quite painful. Worse than animal bites or electric shocks. They cling to your skin and inject moles that stimulate your pain receptors. Please don't make me use them. We're not interested in causing you or your animal the slightest discomfort."

Naturally, he lunged at her before she'd finished delivering her speech. He bent over and tucked himself in, but some of the weapons in her first handful landed on bare skin anyway.

He straightened up as soon as the pain jolted him. His head snapped back. He lurched away from her and hopped around in front of the car with his arms waving and his mouth warped into a silent scream.

Ling tossed a second handful at his chest but it didn't change the situation.

"You should have used a gas," the Elector shouted. "You should have knocked him out."

I'm not a violent person but I had become tougher as I had aged. Technology had helped me overcome some of my reluctance, too. There's very little you can do to people nowadays that can't be repaired in a few hours. I had severed my spinal cord in a motorcycle accident in my youth and been forced to spend four tendays in the hospital—two of them in almost absolute immobility. Today, I believe that problem can be dealt with in six Edays.

I approached Yan Daian from the rear and launched two carefully placed kicks. He went down with both his ankles broken and I grabbed his legs and pulled him off the road.

Ling stared at me for a moment. Then she reached into the three-wheeler and pulled out the weapon she had used to slow down our pursuers.

"Hop on board and start rolling," Ling said. "I'll take care of the Superintendent's friends. They should be pulling up the road in a couple of minutes."

"And what about the over-age adolescent over there? What are you going to do when his reinforcements arrive?"

"Get in the car, Joe. Please."

I looked up at the Elector. "Go ahead without me. Don't waste time."

The Elector looked a little stunned, but she really was dominated by her political passions. She gave the three-wheeler an order and it lurched off the road and bypassed the unconscious elephant. On the other side of the road, Yan Daian was grunting with pain as he dictated something into his notescreen.

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I smiled at Ling. "It will be an adventure," I said. "Besides—you'll never meet anybody who's had more experience at running away. Have you ever been pursued by three angry husbands simultaneously?"

She walked away from me and dropped to one knee beside a tree. I had never seen anyone who had more control over her responses. I have spent a large part of my life learning to interpret the information communicated by things like the slant of a woman's shoulders and the subtle changes that cross her face. Ling was giving me nothing. I could have been talking to a computer screen.

I've always responded to faces that communicate something. It could be almost any desirable quality—tenderness, intelligence, enthusiasm, serenity. But it had to be *something*. Why was I fascinated by a face that told me nothing?

I could only assume it had something to do with her incredible air of absolute competence. I have watched women climb mountains. I have seen hundreds of women play musical instruments. I have even observed surgeons who worked on eyes and nervous systems. There is nothing more beautiful than a woman who combines competence with all the physical and temperamental qualities that evoke romantic and sensual feelings—assuming, of course, that you're the kind of person who tends to have such feelings.

I selected a position behind another tree and put a map of my immediate area on my notescreen. One thing you should look for when you're making a getaway is a crowd. I didn't expect to encounter a real crowd in a forest, but I located something almost as good. Just south of us, approximately three thousand people were participating in some kind of woodland festival.

There was a short description of the festival linked to the map. They were hunting a unicorn, of all things. The animal had been released just a few standard hours before, and they were driving it toward the sunward side of the habitat. Eventually they would pin it against the sunward wall. A cage would be lowered over it. Wine drinking and other activities would celebrate the triumph.

The tower that housed the Yan family was located about twenty kilometers from our current location. They couldn't reach us without detouring around the lake that stretched between us and them. With a little luck, we should be able to reach the edges of the festival before the Yans' emissaries caught up with us.

Ling raised her weapon and pulled the trigger in a single, uninterrupted motion. She was standing up and flowing into a run almost as soon as the gun emitted its last, almost inaudible, phut.

I fell in beside her and told her what I'd found. "We'll probably have to engage in some informal sexual activity," I said. "It's not normally my kind of thing, but my impression is it won't be too bad. The whole affair has a kind of light-hearted air. I don't know what you've learned about me from the databanks but what I really like is a total emotional experience with someone I find genuinely attractive."

"And you're going to all this trouble because you think you can have that kind of experience with *me*?"

Normally, I'm happier when things just develop. You put yourself in the right position and let things happen. But you also have to remember you aren't in complete control of the schedule. The great truth about sexual re-

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lationships—the difficulty that makes them endlessly fascinating—is the fact that they involve two people.

It wasn't the best moment. I had been living in low gravity environments for almost twenty years but I still had to concentrate when I ran. The designers had broken up the forest floor with shrubbery. Some of the trees they had developed had big, spreading roots.

"I've been hoping it might be a possibility," I said.

I must have covered twenty more steps before I realized she wasn't going to respond. It was one of those moments when my emotions let me know just how strong they really are. I try to treat the whole thing lightly—there is no danger, after all, that I'm going to die or be permanently maimed if one of my adventures doesn't turn out. I'm merely going to miss an experience that's aroused a yearning. But it doesn't feel that way when I find myself faced with the kind of reaction her silence seemed to be communicating.

I wanted *her*. Don't tell me I'll want someone else in another tenday. I haven't seen that someone else yet.

I looked down at her feet and tried to convince myself the situation couldn't be completely hopeless. She was still matching me stride for stride. She could have been moving at least 30 percent faster if she had decided to speed up and leave me behind.

"There's something I think I should tell you," Ling said. "My sexual appetites aren't very strong. They're almost as weak as you can get them and still have any. The emotional side of my sexual feelings is just as weak. I still respond to the other sex emotionally. But it's nothing like the kind of overwhelming obsession you seem to experience. My mother thought that was the best way to be."

"And you're happy that way? You haven't thought you might like to strengthen your feelings?"

"It's the way I am. Are you happy with the way you are?"

"I'm not sure happiness is relevant. To me, it's like being immersed in music. I'm surrounded by creatures who seem beautiful and exciting."

I turned my head away from her and decided I might as well concentrate on our immediate problem. "I've had another thought that might be useful," I said. "Why don't we see if we can enlist some help from the quartet who've been pursuing us on the road? Katrinka's obviously going to cast her vote. The Superintendent's faction may be certain they're going to win the election, but she can still raise a fuss about the tactics they used. If they gave us some help now—in exchange for some silence on Katrinka's part . . ."

"Do you really think they might think that way?"

"I just wondered if you thought it was worth a try."

"I haven't got the slightest idea. The people who shot at our wheel may not even be members of the Coalition. The Superintendent has a lot of friends who are interested in weapons and military techniques. Katrinka likes to refer to them as his hoodlum associates."

"You think they might have attacked us just because they were friends of his?"

"I don't know. I really can't tell you what any of these people are feeling, Joe. I've just been doing my job."

The Superintendent appeared on my notescreen as soon as the program advised me it had placed the call. I filled him in as rapidly as I could, in my best impersonation of a direct, no-nonsense, business-oriented male.

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"What are you trying to do?" he asked. "Arrange a romp with Lady Compassion?"

"As a matter of fact, no. I'm just trying to see if Ling and I can get out of this mess without sustaining any serious damage."

"You've paired off with her assistant? This is the first time anyone on her side has done something I can understand."

"I'm not on her side. I haven't participated in a political controversy since I was a teenager."

"You helped her out, didn't you? You crippled a member of the Yan family just so she could continue her grand journey to the polling site. You do understand what kind of people the Yans are? You didn't do something like that without consulting the databanks?"

"I merely offered Katrinka the kind of assistance any—"

"Quit while you're ahead. I've cued in my friends while we were talking. They'll love every minute of it."

We had reached the edge of the festival. I could see two groups making their way through the trees. One group had spread out in a thin line and seemed to be maintaining a fairly serious level of alertness. The members of the other group seemed to be more interested in the bottles they were carrying and the bodies they were grasping.

I had been wearing a green jacket with some distinctive gold striping woven into the lower sleeves. I draped it over my arm, with the sleeves tucked inside, and told Ling she should throw her own jacket over her shoulders—a move that broke up her rather distinctive outline. Her gun went into a thick patch of vines. She had ordered a use-and-recycle version. There was no way we could break it down and conceal it under her jacket.

"It's probably just as well," I said. "We've already inflicted more damage on the Yan family than anyone in his senses should have. None of these little changes are going to give us any permanent protection, but they can give us some hope we won't be identified the instant we're eyeballed by somebody who's been given our description. Now if we can put a little distance between us, so we don't look like a couple . . ."

I gave our position to the Superintendent's friends and headed for the group that seemed to be more pleasure oriented. In a moment, Ling was ensconced between two men who were clutching at her waist and her shoulders. She looked up at the man on her left and I saw her smile for the first time.

An arm slipped around my shoulder and pressed my head against a female breast. I raised my eyes and discovered I had fallen into the clutches of a woman who was at least two heads taller than I am.

I marched through the woods with my hands grasping at human flesh, struggling to keep track of Ling in spite of the fascinating swells and indentations that intruded on my field of vision. I was so busy playing my role that I almost didn't react when I saw two long-legged figures flitting through the woods. They were using a low gravity technique that maximized the value of their leg length. They were taking deliberate, ultra-long steps and carefully making sure they didn't leave the ground and waste time coming down. It was a very efficient way to move in low gravity—if you didn't mind a physique that made you look like some of your ancestors had been water-skimming insects.

Ling had already started pulling her two companions toward a patch of

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waist-high grass that had accumulated around a small pond. Her body was sinking downward in a way that made it obvious what she had in mind.

The two longlegs stared at me and took two steps in my direction. My partner tried to hold onto me as I slipped away from her but my exercise program had given me some useful extra muscle mass.

I pulled out my notescreen and gave the Superintendent's rowdies another fix on my position as I started accelerating. I had been assuming the Superintendent was one of those baronial males who feel they have to keep their word. Now I was beginning to wonder if he might be the type who went in for cruel jokes.

The two longlegs looked like they were picking their way across a pond, rock by rock, but I knew I would be misjudging the whole situation if I thought I could outrun them. My only hope was the possibility my reinforcements really were on their way.

I spotted them before I had managed to cover a hundred meters. They were actually wearing the kind of costumes Europeans wore when they traipsed through the African parks when I was young.

I waved at them frantically and they halted and gestured at me to join them. I threw a glance over my shoulder and discovered two sets of oversize legs were tiptoeing toward me on my left rear, with about fifty meters between us.

You have two choices in a situation like that. You can give up or you can torment yourself and prolong the chase. I usually decide to torment myself.

I veered toward a promising tree and jumped at the lowest branch. I had been living on the Moon for the last few years so the gravity on Mercury was actually stronger than the gravity field my muscles were used to. I managed to get a grip on the branch anyway. I even hauled myself upright and worked my way onto the branch above it.

The longlegs stopped under the tree. For a moment I thought they might be content just to tree me while they requested instructions. I could see one of them talking into his notescreen as I put another layer of branches between me and the base of the tree. Then the other one bent at the knees and I watched him float off the ground. He rolled onto his side and eased himself onto the branch I had just vacated.

He was mostly legs but his arms had received some genetic assistance, too. It was obviously time I switched from flight to fight. I did, after all, have the advantage that I commanded the high ground.

We played a few moves of a little game: he ran around on the lower branches, looking for an opportunity to get up to my level, and I maneuvered so I would always be in a good position to stomp on his hands as soon as he got near me.

The game ended when his partner folded up the notescreen and prepared to join the fun. On the ground, my four bodyguards were still acting like they would be happy to perform all kinds of derring-do if I would just cross the distance between us and link up with their group.

Ling had covered at least three steps before I realized she had broken out of the grassy area in which she had been engaging in pleasanter recreational activities. The second waterbug had elevated himself to the first branch and I was trying to watch both of them at the same time. Ling was flying toward the Superintendent's friends as if she had been launched from a catapult.

I didn't see her grab their gun. I was watching my adversaries maneuver

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into a good position for a pincers attack. They were talking very conversationally—like people who knew exactly what they were doing and believed I couldn't do anything in response if I heard them coordinating their efforts. Then the one on the right snapped back his head and produced a noise that sounded like a cross between a scream and a gargle. The other one joined him in the chorus and I watched them clutch at the branches with both arms as they tried to maintain their hold on the tree.

The Superintendent's henchmen were willing to drive us back to the tower near the spaceport but they rolled off as soon as we climbed out of their three-wheeler. They had already called the Yan family and apologized for the fact that missiles from their gun had left two Yan employees sitting under a tree with broken legs. The Superintendent had apparently overestimated their zest for conflict with people who took it seriously.

"I'll give you my best assessment of the situation," one of them had told me. "You won't like it, but it's the best advice anyone can give you, colleague. Try to hole up until you can leave Mercury. There aren't many places where you can hide from the Yan family for long. Their theory of human relations is dominated by one big principle—their neighbors should be afraid of them. But you might pull it off."

The tower we had picked was an obvious choice, but it housed two of the biggest hotels on the planet. I had already reserved a suite equipped with the optimum security package.

It was a nice little fortress. The walls were meter thick active defense units. The electronic systems were monitored by detection routines that would switch everything to a new path if they spotted an anomaly that lasted a hundredth of a second. The food and wine programs in the fabricator were as select as the programs in the three-wheeler I had rented. The besieged could eat and drink like potentates without opening a single chink in their defenses.

Ling raised her eyebrows when she tasted the first bottle I opened after we secured the one and only door.

"In answer to your question," I said, "I can pay the bill for this right up to the day your ship leaves. Unfortunately, at that point I won't be able to buy a passage on the ship for myself."

"This is way out of my orbit financially, Joe. You shouldn't expect any significant help from Katrinka, either. She'll just tell herself you did all this because of me."

I raised my glass. "We're free and we're secure. And one of us is supposed to be incredibly bright."

"So what do you want me to do? Plug into your financial alter and see if I can snatch up a few million yuris?"

I shook my head. "At this point, I don't think the best human brain in the Solar System could *follow* the things my alter does."

"You have two problems if we stay in this suite until the next ship leaves for Earth-Luna. First, you need to raise the money for your own ticket. Then, you have to get from here to the orbiter without being captured."

"And what do you suggest I do about them?"

"I presume your alter has a risk setting. Set it as high as you're willing to set it. You may lose everything—but at this point you really don't have anything to lose. For the escape to the orbiter—I'll work out a tactical plan and see what kind of weapons we'll need."

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She said it very coolly, of course—just as coolly as she had assessed the situation and gone into action when we had been attacked on the road.

For the last twenty years, my alter had been operating with the risk factor set at 23 percent. It couldn't venture into a situation unless it was certain I wouldn't lose more than 23 percent of my capital. I wasn't trying to get rich. I was just trying to maximize my life style without engaging in that restrictive, time-wasting activity called work.

"I would call that a fallback plan," I said. "We've got a lot of things we can work with. We're operating on a world with a population of approximately five hundred million people. The Yans have to have political adversaries. There should be some divisions in the Conclave we can work on, too. The Talents can't be one hundred percent in favor of this hands off policy. They're still people, no matter what they've done to themselves."

"I don't know anything about politics. I just gave you my best advice. I gave up trying to understand politics when I was a teenager. I'm an administrator—I work with accounting programs, I schedule Katrinka's trips, I make sure her customers get what they want. I think you got the wrong impression when you saw me reacting when our wheel got hit. I'm not some kind of supergenius strategist."

I spoke American English when I was young. We had a word in those days that described people who were very good at things like math and science but didn't know a thing about human relationships, and didn't seem to have much interest in the activities most people found pleasurable. It was a derogatory word with a derogatory sound—nerd. They don't seem to have developed an equivalent word in the offEarth societies—perhaps because their cultures have too much respect for learning and technical expertise.

It had taken me awhile to learn there was such a thing as a beautiful female nerd, but it had been a useful discovery. At least a third of the scientists I had been in love with would have been considered prime specimens when the term had been in vogue. They could have spent their whole lives in their laboratories and field camps and never felt they were missing anything important. Nerdhood wasn't as obvious when a woman could dazzle you with her looks, of course. You don't need social skills when half the humans you encounter are males who think you're doing them a big favor if you just stand still while they try to entertain you.

Ling had doctorates in cosmology, administrative organization, and number theory. They are all fascinating subjects. I'm certain there were times when they made her heart thump with excitement. But you could master everything the human race knew about all three of them without spending one moment wondering if another human being was going to do something you wanted them to do.

"And you're happy spending your life helping someone like Katrinka?" I said.

She shrugged. "It's easy work. It leaves me plenty of time to pay attention to other things."

She smiled. It was a shy, guarded smile but at that moment, in spite of everything, it glittered as if somebody had been shining a spotlight on her.

"I'm still deciding what I want to do with my life, Joe. That's one of the differences between people in your age cohort and people my age. When you were young, you didn't know you could have centuries ahead of you."

"And right now you feel you're only good at planning financial programs and shoot 'em ups?"

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"I'm a member of three circles that are looking at different approaches to the open universe question. I'm part of the outer circle of two groups that are looking at mathematical issues most mathematicians have never heard of. But don't ask me to help you manipulate political systems. For that you have to understand the emotions of the people involved. You have to feel the same things they feel."

"Someone who can be happy working for Katrinka," I said, "obviously doesn't know much about feelings like vanity and the drive for social status."

"Is that a flaw? Does it change your feelings about me?"

"Right now—at this moment—you are the most desirable woman in the Solar System."

Her shoulders relaxed just a little—just enough that I could see it. Her eyes turned inward.

"Does that matter to you?" I said.

"Right now—at this moment . . . yes."

Her responses were gentle, as you would expect. But they were real. We could spend a very pleasant time together, if we ever got our troubles straightened out.

When I had left Earth in 2071, I had been approached by a representative from an agency that engaged in an activity it called "preventive peacekeeping." She had noticed that I had bounced around the home planet like a billiard ball and become enmeshed in the social structures of most of the places I visited. She hadn't asked me to *spy*. She had merely offered me a small guaranteed stipend in return for reports and observations.

When she had learned I was embarking for Mercury, she had given me some contacts who could help me pursue my social rounds. The Mercurian political system was a novel idea at the time. Her agency wanted to make sure I got a good look at it.

I left Ling sleeping on the bed and asked my notescreen for a complete list of all the members of the Conclave of Talents, with their official personality profiles. The Mercurian constitution writers hadn't been able to agree on a single personality type. The whole scheme had almost failed when their constitutional convention had been split between the people who favored moral virtues like compassion and the people who favored intellectual qualities like the ability to absorb huge amounts of information.

In the end, they had compromised. Citizens who wanted to join the official candidate pool had their choice of four different personality clusters. Pick the one you could live with, schedule a few sessions with a certified, state of the art personality modification program, and you, too, could spend your life groveling for votes and debating the best design for the latest upgrade to the recycling system.

I thought it was a promising idea the first time I heard of it, and I still think it's probably one of the better political systems humans have clobbered together. The basic trouble with all political systems is the material they work with—the human personality. If you tell the voters they can only elect people who possess certain personality traits, you're going to eliminate most of the afflictions that have plagued democracies since the Greeks first started experimenting with the idea.

You could go further, of course. You could modify the personalities of the *voters*. But that would mean *I* would have to change.

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At the moment, the Conclave of Talents seemed to be dominated by people with two kinds of personality clusters: the Bos and the Mings. The other two clusters—the Joos and the Xins—only held about 25 percent of the seats in the Conclave.

In spite of that, I felt I would have better luck if I appealed to a Xin. For one thing, most Xins were women.

If I had been on Mercury longer, I would have had a detailed picture of the political situation in my head. As it was, I had to spend three hours rummaging through the databanks just so I could piece together a rudimentary cartoon. Ling was standing behind me by the time I was done. She sat down beside me and I studied the information on the screen while we mixed the aroma of coffee with the flavors of lobster and sausage pastries.

"The Xins are an interesting cluster," I said. "Apparently there was a faction who felt they needed some politicians who were adventurous and novelty-seeking. So they compromised and balanced the adventurousness with an intense need for community approval."

I called up a three-dimensional diagram of the social and political alignments that influenced the Talent pool. It was mostly based on numbers and links I had worked out myself, but I've learned to trust my intuitive grasp of the social patterns I encounter. I can usually see what the overall pattern is, even if I can't defend my conclusions in a debate with a real expert.

"Forget this is supposed to represent people," I said. "Just think of it as forces and connections. This one over here is very powerful but it has all these other forces tugging on it. These two are weaker but they don't have a lot of forces acting on them and they're both pulling in the same direction. What would you do if you wanted to get the red sphere in the center all the way to the right hand side of the screen?"

"Does the red one represent us?"

"It might."

She pointed at one of the larger spheres. "Weaken that one. Reduce its overall strength by about 20 percent."

"Have you got a second choice? Something that requires less of a change?"

"Does it have to be a certainty? You haven't told me the boundary conditions."

"Let's try for a high probability."

Her face tautened into the tight-stretched total concentration I had observed every time I had seen her coping with a crisis. Her hands moved across the screen as if she were physically trying out possibilities. We would have made an interesting visual study—she totally absorbed in what she was doing, me totally focused on her.

"That one," she said. "Can you make that one pull on the red sphere? If you can—then that one connects to this one . . . see? And this one is part of a group that . . ."

She had ignored the two Xins I had been considering and pounced on another Xin named MyLien Thang. I hadn't thought of Talent Thang because her connections looked weak. Her strength lay in the way those weak connections plugged into networks that added up to something much more impressive. She was obviously an optimum choice—once someone like Ling traced the connections for you.

I spent two more hours arranging the contact and roughing in a draft of

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my approach message. Ling plugged her notescreen into a full-size desk screen and connected to one of her circles.

She turned her back on a screen full of mathematical symbols as soon as I told her dinner was ready, but you could tell she wasn't really interested in the array of bottles and edibles I had ordered up. "I think I'd better get my approach message polished up," I said after awhile. "I hope you don't mind if I concentrate on that for a couple of hours."

She looked confused. She had obviously been assuming she was going to spend the evening being polite to me. Then she recovered—it didn't take her long—and let me know there had been some interesting developments in one of her mathematical groups—stuff she was really going to have to work on if she wanted to grasp its implications. She even mouthed some words to the effect that she would really much rather spend the time with me.

It wasn't what I wanted, of course. I had activated one of my own modifications during the time we had spent on the bed. We had been joined together for nearly an hour, isolated in our own private universe. I would have kept it up for a dozen more hours if we had been embracing in a zero g environment.

"I should advise you this really isn't my kind of thing," MyLien Thang said. "I almost slipped your letter into the polite refusal file as soon as I read it."

Talent Thang had conformed to the fashion by outfitting herself with a loose floor-length gown and hair that hung down her back to her waist. For her screen background she had chosen a subdued, gently colored floral arrangement.

"I've talked to some friends of mine who seemed to have the right connections," she said. "They managed to talk to a member of the Yan family and he asked me to arbitrate this dispute. If that's acceptable to you, I'll bring their representative onscreen now."

"How does arbitration work? Is your decision final?"

"If you don't like my suggestions, you're both free to disregard them. I have no legal power in this. No member of the Conclave has. But our opinion usually carries some weight. I've only arbitrated three other disputes myself, but the Yan family said they wanted me to arbitrate, since I'm the Talent you contacted."

She paused for a moment and I thought I picked up a little shimmer that flowed across her gown. It was only the slightest hint of a motion—the mere suggestion that a successful, fully elected politician had actually engaged in a *wiggle*.

"Please don't be optimistic, Mr. Baske. None of the people I talked to expressed much hope for you. I decided to go ahead because I'd spent an hour examining your history. You have a talent for adventuring and enjoying life. Our society can use some of that. I hope you'll consider staying on Mercury if we manage to get your present troubles straightened out. I can only help you, however, if I can work out something that has some general support."

I nodded. It was a variation on a theme I had heard before. Translation: one more woman had decided Joseph Louis Baske is a lovable scamp.

"I'll be happy to stay here for awhile if my companion and I can enjoy the freedoms your citizens normally enjoy."

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She split the screen and presented us with a view of our friend Yan Daian. He was sitting in a wheelchair, naturally.

"Citizen Yan has already told me his views of the incident that brought this on," our arbitrator said. "Is there anything you'd like to add to the report you sent me? If you don't, I'm prepared to present my first suggestion."

I glanced at Ling. I wanted to take her hand, but it didn't seem like an appropriate gesture.

"I think I would like to hear your suggestion before I say anything else," I said.

"You are a stranger on our world," Talent Thang said. "While it's true that you physically attacked Yan Daian, it was your companion, Ling Chime, who instigated the actions that led to the attack. She was also the person who actually fired on two members of the Yan family and caused them extreme pain and bodily damage. Yan Daian has already indicated his family is willing to overlook your part in the affair, in return for a small token indemnity. Ling Chime's offense was much greater. From her, the Yan family demands an indemnity of three million yuris. In lieu of that, they will accept complete samples of all her tissues and body fluids, and a two Eyear residency in their development facilities."

I stepped toward the screen. "That's absurd. The damage she did to the three members of the Yan family can be repaired in a few days. You're talking about a sum of money that represents years of her current salary."

"The Yan family do not permit people to attack them," Yan Daian said. "We cannot tolerate such behavior."

Ling was sitting in a lounge chair with her legs curled under her thighs and her notescreen perched on her lap. She lowered her head and started entering data with her stylus.

"Do you have anything to say to that, Ling Chime?" Talent Thang said.

"Give me two more minutes," Ling said. "If you don't mind."

Talent Thang stared at her. Ling had responded in exactly the same way she probably reacted when somebody interrupted her while she was pondering some aspect of her math interests.

"Yan Daian was deliberately obstructing traffic," I said. "Ling's employer was trying to make an important rendezvous before a fixed, unalterable deadline. How can—"

"I'll pay the indemnity," Ling said. "I've worked out a loan with the Third Traders Bank in Bangkok. Their Mercury alter has approved it."

I stepped up to her chair and studied her notescreen. The interest rate was nineteen point seven percent. "It will take you twenty-five Eyears to pay that back," I said. "Katrinka will have you under her thumb for over two decades."

"I'm not going to spend two Eyears in their laboratories."

"It seems like an exorbitant commitment to me, too," Talent Thang said. "Citizen Yan—if you reduced your demand to half a million yuris, Ling Chime would still have to spend over six Eyears paying off her debt. While she lived on a subsistence income."

"She should have thought of that before she subjected a member of my family to this indignity."

"You'll be restored to your normal condition in a tenday," I said. "And for that you think Ling should spend decades in a condition that amounts to penal servitude?"

"We are making you an offer, Mr. Baske. Talent Thang's friends asked us

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to make an offer and we have. You don't have to accept it if you don't want to."

"It's settled, Joe," Ling said. "It's the best we can do."

"And what happens to us? Do I just let you leave here in a few days? Do I get on the ship with you and hope Katrinka will let me see you now and then after you get home?"

"You'll be preoccupied by someone else two tendays after I leave here. Even if I stayed—how long would it last? Two or three tendays?"

She was right, of course. The idyll I had in mind wouldn't last more than a few tendays. But nothing lasts. Every pleasure slips away from you. Does that mean you shouldn't value it?

I've met people who spent hefty fractions of their annual incomes traveling to places where they could spend a few hours listening to a certain opera. Should I deny my own hungers merely because I knew they would eventually be replaced by some other set of beauties and mysteries?

I picked up my notescreen and entered the code that generates an up to the second summary from my financial alter. I already knew what the number was to within a few hundred yuris, but I never make a financial decision without getting a solid fix on that basic bit of information.

The alter would have to double my current wealth just to satisfy the Yan family's demands. I would have nothing left over for my own needs, even if it succeeded. Obviously I needed to try for something grander.

I turned back to Talent Thang. "Will you excuse me a few minutes? I'd like to investigate some possibilities."

"The situation has been resolved," Yan Daian said. "If Citizen Ling will just transfer her funds to our account, we'll all be able to resume our normal activities."

"I haven't agreed to the settlement. Is there any reason we have to rush through this, Talent Thang?"

"I'm certain we can spare a few minutes. I really think it would be best, Citizen Yan."

I backed out of the camera field and settled into the other lounge chair I had ordered for the suite. I had already entered the boundary conditions I was giving the alter. I wanted to end up with four and a half million: Ling's three million, plus the one and a half million I already had. A two hundred percent increase. Risk factor: seventy percent.

The alter came back with a zero response thirty seconds after I made the request. It always keeps an updated file of possible deals in memory. The time lag between Mercury and the big financial centers in the Earth-Moon system created problems, but Mercury had its own exchanges. Most of the currency derivatives I traded in the Earth-Luna exchanges could be traded on Mercury.

I stared at a pair of elegantly shaped vases that had been arranged beside the big wall screen. There was a moment when their slender lines seemed to be blurred by a mist. Then I pressed my stylus against the screen and entered a new risk factor: one hundred percent.

Ling hopped out of her chair. Her fingers grabbed my wrist before I could cover the notescreen with my hand.

"That's absurd," she said. "It's settled. I took a risk. I got us into trouble. You're just a bystander."

A list of deals appeared on the screen. I didn't understand any of them, of course. Those days were long gone. The only number that meant anything

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comprehensible was highlighted in red at the bottom of the screen. Probability of success: seventy-three percent.

She tightened her grip on my wrist as she turned her head toward the wall screen. "He's gambling his entire stock of capital. Isn't there some way you can lock up this arrangement so he'll stop?"

She didn't know it but she was actually understating the situation. I had transformed most of my possessions into programs when I had left the Moon. My violin—one of my most treasured belongings—was just a bunch of numbers and instructions recorded in a molecular engineering file. So were my wines, three fourths of my clothes, and most of the other items that make life tolerable. None of it could be reconstructed if I didn't have a single neil or yuri in my bank account.

"I've agreed to accept the proceeds of your loan," Yan Daian said. "If he wants to gamble so he can present you with a gift, that's his affair."

Ling's fingers pressed against the nerves of my left wrist. Her other hand snapped into action with all the speed her designers had coded into her nervous system. She backed away from the chair with my notescreen pressed against her hip.

"I'm not going to be responsible for your impoverishment. I'm not worth it."

I don't know what gave me the biggest surprise—the blurred movement or the blurted words.

"You certainly seemed worth it a few hours ago," I said. "I'm not exactly pining after an experience I haven't had yet."

"We've got days—whole Earthdays—before Katrinka leaves. We can have all of that we want."

"I don't want just that. I want to share your life. I want us to have the whole experience."

"There's no way you can share my life. Do you really think you can follow the kind of things I'm involved with? What difference would it make if you could? Do you have any idea what the people fifteen years younger than me are like? Do you understand what's happening with the children who are just being born?"

I frowned. I understood the first part of what she'd said. The second part sounded like irrelevant babbling. How could the brains and bodies coming out of the gene designers' shops have any effect on my relationship with the particular combination of genes and experience that had snared my emotions at this particular moment in my life?

I've met a number of men—hundreds by now, probably—who wanted to know the secret of my "success" with women. I usually tell them the big secret is the fact that I really am in love with every woman I pursue. But that's not the whole story. I've always had another talent—a gift for seeing the world through other people's eyes. The other people are usually female, of course. But that's a minor matter. The basic human emotions tend to be the same. Ling might be smarter than me. But I had been exploring the mysteries of the human personality for almost ninety years.

In some ways, I was looking at a creature from another world when I looked at young, super-enhanced people like Ling. But that didn't change the emotions that any organism will feel when it's faced with certain circumstances. When you're threatened, you become frightened. When you can't do anything about a threat—when you can't fight or run—you become depressed.

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I had thought her coolness under fire was an aspect of her general competence. But now I understood it could also be a sign her emotions had been flattened by the terrible knowledge that she had become obsolete on the day she was born.

I didn't understand all of this immediately, of course. I worked some of it out later. But I could see the outlines of it. And I could form another hypothesis. When people grab a subject out of nowhere and throw it into an emotional argument, it's usually a sign they're trying to tell you something. It may even be an indication they're *asking* you for something.

"Is that what's bothering you?" I said. "Is that the real reason you're wasting your abilities working for someone like Katrinka? Is that why you're playing around with ideas? Instead of making them the central focus of your life?"

"Doesn't it bother you? Haven't you grasped what's happening?"

"In thirty years—fifty years—sometime in the foreseeable future—I'm going to be sharing the Solar System with people who have brains that will probably make me look like an imbecile by comparison. And so will you. So will the people being born today, probably."

"You aren't going to *share* it with them. You're going to be *replaced* by them."

I pushed myself out of the chair and stepped in front of the main screen. "Talent Thang—will you please link me with my notescreen?"

"Of course."

She put a replica of my notescreen on the bottom half of her screen and I immediately gave it my current password. The alter program intoned the traditional reminder that past performance is no guarantee of future success—one of the more tiresome mantras the lawyer class has inflicted on human society—and I gave it an execution order. Then I turned back to Ling.

"No one is going to *replace* me," I said. "Not in any sense that means anything important. They can't *feel* for me. They can't *live my life* for me. They can't change the way I felt when I held your shoulders in my hands and saw your eyes looking up at me."

"Are you trying to make me grateful? Is that it? You're hoping I'll stay on Mercury after Katrinka leaves just because I feel grateful?"

"I'm hoping you'll stay here because you want to. And because you have the opportunity."

"You're risking everything you own just so you can have a temporary frolic with someone you hardly know."

"I'm hoping I'll have a kind of experience I've had before—the kind of experience I can have when someone makes me feel the way you make me feel."

"How long is this going to take?" Yan Daian said. "It seems to me we've settled everything we were supposed to settle."

"I suggest you stay with us, Citizen Yan," Talent Thang said. "If Mr. Baske doesn't object, I can even put my image of his program on your screen and let you monitor his progress."

"This is a private matter between him and her. We've already arrived at a settlement."

"It would still be best if you stayed. I'm certain your family would agree with me."

* * *

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It only took the alter ten minutes to get my total wealth above four million. But a minute later the total dropped back to three-sixty. From there it started bouncing between three million two hundred thousand and three million nine hundred thousand.

No one talked much. Even Yan Daian started showing signs he was becoming absorbed in the numbers. Ling had dropped into a chair. Her hands were gripped between her knees. Her eyes had turned into slits—as if she were trying to limit her sensory input to the bare minimum.

The bottom line crossed the four million mark for the second time just twenty minutes after I'd actuated the program. Then it started down again.

"I think you'd better stop, Mr. Baske," Talent Thang said. "Please consider that an official request—based on my judgment of what seems to be happening."

I studied her face for a moment and decided this would be a good time to yield to higher authority. I gave the alter the word and it closed out its positions at three million, eight hundred thousand.

"Are we done?" Yan Daian asked.

"Mr. Baske is seven hundred thousand yuris short of the amount he needs to pay Citizen Ling's debt. He has engaged in one of the most extraordinary acts I've ever witnessed. As a member of the Conclave of Talents—as somebody responsible for maintaining the peace and general civility of our society—I believe you would be doing everyone a service if you reduced Citizen Ling's indemnity by that amount."

Yan Daian raised one of his long arms above his head and studied his palm. "It's not my fault he needs a better alter."

"This incident has already come to the attention of a number of people who are connected to your family. You are not without fault yourself, Citizen Yan. I have reason to believe your family would probably feel you had done the right thing if you exercised some leniency at this moment. I haven't met your mother personally. But I have several friends who have. From what they've told me, she would be a much happier woman if they could advise her you exercised some good judgment at this moment. . . ."

My time with Ling didn't end after three or four tendays, as we had both assumed. It lasted over three Mercury years—almost all of an Earth year. It concluded with a touch of comedy that amused both of us.

I left Ling alone with her screens one day and a musical, slightly ironic laugh attracted my attention. I spent most of a tenday wondering how I could tell Ling about the relationship I was developing with the woman who owned the musical laugh. And discovered—as I should have expected—that Ling had been putting off the sad day when she would have to tell me she had established a community with three people in her cosmology circle. They had all agreed, it seemed, that they should set up an in-person household on a "promising-ooking research habitat the Kwan-Bain Cooperative is placing in a long-duration cometary orbit." Ling had already purchased her passage to the habitat, in fact. She had meant to tell me before she made her reservations, but . . .

It hadn't been quite the idyll I had envisioned. Ling spent at least half of every day in front of her screens. She had left the rest of it up to me, however. I gave her dinners she would never have arranged for herself. I showed her how we could both take full advantage of the possibilities created by her dimmed sexual responses. I put some of my capital into a small

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partnership and showed her she could live quite comfortably without indenturing herself to someone like Katrinka Yamioto Oldaf-Li. Ling had never really looked at the financial markets. She had just assumed they were too risky.

And, of course, we talked. All real love affairs involve three things: sexual union, shared experience, and talk.

Ling had been eleven when she had begun to understand her true situation. Up until then, she had thought of herself as someone who had been given special gifts, thanks to her parents. "Then I went through this period where I got really fascinated by Go. I spent two hundred hours working with mentor programs. I ate meals in front of my screens so I could play in tournaments. Then one day I ran into somebody who left me feeling totally confused. The only thing I really understood about the game was the fact that I'd lost. And I discovered I'd been playing someone who was only six."

She only talked about the subject when we were lying in bed, with our bodies arranged so she didn't have to look at me while she talked. This was the first time she'd talked about it with someone who wasn't a member of her own age group. "The essence of intelligence is the ability to predict the future. I couldn't tell my parents how I felt. They'd practically beggared themselves so I could have the best. But all the people my own age could figure it out. The numbers indicated intelligence was going up about twenty percent every nine years. It was going to double about every thirty years."

"So you just created a little hideaway for yourself. And stepped out of the mainstream of life."

"I didn't know what to do. None of us do. I couldn't see it the way you do. I'd spent my childhood thinking I was the next step in human evolution. And suddenly it turns out I'm just a tiny little interim phase."

It was one of those relationships in which two people exchange bits of their personalities. Ling was glowing with anticipation when she transmitted her last message from her couch on the ground-to-orbit shuttle. I think I can say she had discovered she could enjoy life and pursue her own pleasures even if she knew someone "better" was going to inhabit the Solar System in the not-too-distant future. She had shaken off her torpor and recognized there are aspects of life that are just as important as intelligence and competence.

As for me—I had finally been forced to concede that the gulf she was worried about was very real. There was going to come a day when the Solar System would be full of intelligent, physically magnificent women who would think of me as a rather crude prototype. I had always made contact with the minds and personalities of the women I loved. Someday that would be impossible.

The woman with the unforgettable laugh was a survivor from the middle of the twentieth century—the only member of that rare company I have ever become involved with. She had outlasted two bouts with cancer in the days when tumors were assaulted with powerful chemical poisons. Sometime in her eighties, thirty years after the new century had begun, she had discovered she wasn't living in the last years of her life after all. She had dodged all the traps that could have killed her and reached a time when she could start her life all over again.

She had heard about me, of course. I think she took me up mostly out of curiosity. She looked at the world around her with the arch, slightly de-

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tached viewpoint of a tourist from a remote, immeasurably alien country. Her laugh was even more ironic—and just as musical—when she moved in my arms as she responded to the elation flooding her senses.

When she had been a student, near the middle of the twentieth century, she had studied the literature of England and the United States. It was the subject conventional young women studied in the United States in those days. She liked to quote a seventeenth century poet named Andrew Marvell. *Had we but world enough and time, this coyness, Lady, were no crime.*

We had lived into an era when we had several worlds, she pointed out. And much time. And coyness was no longer fashionable. O

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A QUESTION OF TIME

If, through some ancient alchemy of art,
We might defy tyrannic time and change,
If youth were all, if fading age were strange,
If both of us were marble, like your heart—

If I had been a polar boulder, you
Were cold, caressing ice; or you a star
And I your planet, firmly held afar;
If time had stopped to watch us woo—

I might forgive your Fabian delay.
But you and I are merely mortal, doomed
Like ice to thaw, like stars to fade; entombed
From birth in life's inexorable decay.

Die coy—or wake to see we're not too late
To smash the clock and throw
the works at fate.

—Jack Williamson

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ON BOOKS

Peter Heck

CRYPTONOMICON
by Neal Stephenson
Avon, $27.50 (hc)
ISBN: 0-380-97346-4

Stephenson's latest is more a semi-historical thriller than SF, and it's being marketed as the former. Those who've enjoyed the author's previous work should check it out anyway—it's got almost everything you liked about *Snow Crash* and *The Diamond Age,* and a few new wrinkles.

The story takes place in two time frames: one during World War II, the other in the near future; several of the main figures in the 1940s era are parents of those in the modern one. The major plot link between the two is a large treasure supposedly hidden in or around the Philippines by a cabal of Axis officers, to which clues appear in various secret codes. It is the latter from which the book derives its name.

While the book has multiple interweaving plot lines, the two key figures are Lawrence Pritchard Waterhouse, a mathematical prodigy who by chance spent several months in the company of Alan Turing before World War II; and his grandson Randy, a youngish hacker whose work takes him all around the Pacific rim. They have in common cryptography. In the early stages of WW II, the Navy discovers Lawrence's talent, promotes him, and sends him to Bletchley Park, the famous code-breaking center in England, where the German Enigma codes were cracked. His grandson Randy has inherited the talent, if not the genius, and is putting it to work for an entrepreneur seeking to create a secure data haven in a fictitious Southeast Asian nation.

The tone of the book, especially in the WW II sections, is strongly reminiscent of Thomas Pynchon's wild excursions into paranoid black humor. Just enough of the characters are borderline psychotic—having whole armies of other people trying to kill you will do that—to make the plot twists genuinely unpredictable at many points. And, in common with Pynchon, he has the knack for finding something comic in the grimmest possible situations—e.g., Waterhouse's reaction to being bombed at Pearl Harbor.

But Stephenson's wry humor also lets him pick up and run with authentic historical details—the WW II military slang term "huff duff," for example, turns into a comic mantra with his repetitions. And he can build a tiny fantasy world in the middle of reality—as in the section where Lawrence is sent to run a station on Qwghlm, a preposterous British island just strange enough to be convincing. Better yet, Stephenson is a master at using such bits to set up something later in the story—so that when Randy runs into a bunch of Qwghlmians several hundred pages later, the reader nods and takes it in stride.

The two plots are spun out in alternation, the reader gradually beginning to understand where things are trending—and having the rug pulled out from under just often enough to keep from getting too cocky about it. The final few scenes tie all the strands together. But it's

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the fun along the way that makes this one of the most exhilarating reads you're likely to pick up this year. Stephenson just keeps getting better, and if that ultimately means he isn't marketed as hard-core SF any longer, that's the way the game works. The genre hasn't lost anything except in the eyes of those people who think that labels mean something. This is a big, rowdy, irreverent book, straight out of the same mind that wrote *Snow Crash,* and that ought to be sufficient recommendation.

SHIVA 3000
by Jan Lars Jensen
Harcourt Brace, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-15-100454-4

This bravura novel is inevitably going to be compared to Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light.* Set in an India where the gods of Hinduism play an active role in everyday life, it delves into the traditional culture of that nation with enormous energy and often wild imagination.

The story begins with the arrival of a group of Buddhist monks in an Indian city, where they meet with extreme rejection and persecution. As they leave the city, they are captured by pirates and enslaved. But a strange apparition, the Baboon Warrior, arrives, kills their persecutors, and goes on his way. This is a sort of prelude; the major action of the book concerns Rakesh, a young Hindu who believes that his *dharma* requires him to kill the Baboon Warrior. In pursuit of that quest, Rakesh meets a palace engineer, Vasant, who seeks to repair a career that has been ruined by a sect of Kama Sutrans.

The two strike up a very unsteady alliance. Vasant is of much higher caste than Rakesh, but Rakesh considers his mission (received in a vision of Shiva) to be the more important factor in their relationship. Meanwhile, the government has been overthrown, and Vasant wishes to return to restore order. Neither, it turns out, can arrive at his goals by any direct route. And so they wander about the countryside, encountering one strange phenomenon after another, and hearing the equally strange stories of those they encounter. So we get a combat where the various sides literally bombard each other with hot spices. We meet a sect of monks (the descendants of the persecuted Buddhists of the first chapter) who have perfected their martial skills to the utmost. And there are numerous appearances of the god Jagganath (our word "juggernaut" is a corruption of the name), an enormous self-propelled wooden effigy that destroys cities the way a man would crush an anthill.

At first, the exotic atmosphere of this novel reads like fantasy, but the reader is likely to glimpse an SF core to it well before Jensen reveals the full import of all the bizarre goings on. Suffice it to say that when Rakesh comes face to face with his *dharma,* he learns that it means something entirely different from what he expected—and then events take on a momentum of their own, just like the implacable Jagganath. Don't let the somewhat opaque beginning chapters put you off; the book is well worth sticking with.

THE MARTIAN RACE
by Gregory Benford
Warner, $23.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-446-52633-9

Mars continues to fascinate our best SF writers; here's Benford's take on what the first explorers of that alien world are likely to find. As one would expect from Benford, it's hard as nails in its scientific extrapolation, yet with a strong emphasis on the human elements that will determine how history is played out on

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the new stage of our neighboring planets. This novel, which grows out of a collaborative short story by Benford and Elisabeth Malartre, uses up-to-date space hardware and mission plans to give its extrapolations unusual solidity.

The immediate impetus for the Mars expedition in this novel is a NASA disaster in the tradition of *Challenger*; in its wake, the space agency kills its Mars program. A variety of private interests offers a thirty-billion dollar prize to the first crew to fulfill the goals of the scrapped NASA mission. This sets off an international race, utilizing ex-NASA personnel and surplus hardware. We follow the events from the point of view of Julia Barth, the only woman member of a largely US group funded by John Axelrod, a publicity-happy entrepreneur.

The story begins with the crew nearing the end of its stay on Mars, and covers the process of getting there in flashbacks. They have collected their samples, fueled up their return module, and have only a few minor details to finish up, if all goes well. The main source of tension is the expected arrival of the rival mission, sponsored by a Chinese/European coalition, in a faster, nuclear-powered rocket. There is concern that the newcomers may attempt to hijack the prize, by fulfilling the minimum mission requirements and using their greater speed to beat the earlier group home.

Then, on a side trip, Barth and her partner discover a form of life, a sort of vegetation thriving in an underground cave kept warm by the planet's internal heat. This raises the scientific stakes of the expedition enormously, and Barth pushes for another, more extended look at the site. At this point, though, it becomes evident that there are likely to be problems with the return vehicle, and the scientific questions have to go onto a back burner. When the second expedition arrives, the tension rises even higher, as the explorers begin to imagine all sorts of scenarios: the newcomers will steal their fuel and leave them stranded; worse yet, the newcomers have orders to murder them and return home with their samples to win the prize.

Most of this takes place in a claustrophobic Mars habitat, under the intense scrutiny of Earth's media. Benford builds the pressure effectively, so that even a reader who's seen the whole "first expedition to Mars" scenario played out by a dozen previous authors is likely to stay with the story as it builds to its conclusion. A strong working out of one of the great "set piece" scenarios in modern SF.

DARWIN'S RADIO
by Greg Bear
Del Rey, $24.00 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-42333-X

Here's another variant on one of Bear's favorite themes: the end of the world (see *Blood Music, Eon,* etc.). This one's quieter than some of his other versions, but by the final pages of the book, it is clear that the world as we have known it is about to disappear forever.

The starting point is the discovery of a group of frozen prehistoric bodies in the high Alps. The surviving member of the discovery party, which is caught in the mountains by a storm, is Mitch Rafelson, an American anthropologist previously discredited by his part in a controversy over returning human remains discovered in the Pacific Northwest to the Indian tribes who claim them as ancestors (despite scientific evidence to the contrary). He believes that the frozen bodies were those of a Neandertal couple and their Sapiens child, but the anthropological establishment keeps the

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evidence under wraps, preventing him from making the case.

At almost the same time, Christopher Dicken of the National Centers for Infectious Diseases investigates a series of mass graves in former Soviet Georgia, revealing the slaughter of large numbers of pregnant women. The government makes extreme efforts to keep it secret, and Dicken on the spot begins to suspect that the reason is not political but biological.

And in the U.S., a strange disease, apparently a sort of flu, is attacking pregnant women and causing their babies to be deformed. A group of federal investigators recruits a woman molecular biologist, Kaye Lang, whose work has helped identify the genetic mechanism believed to be responsible for the epidemic. But when she begins to realize that the "disease"—which appears to have stricken almost the entire female childbearing population around the world—is in fact no disease but the beginning of an evolutionary jump, she falls afoul of her superiors.

As the political situation deteriorates, with national health emergency measures escalating, Kaye and Mitch go on the run, with Dicken fighting a rear guard action against the government agencies all of whom are determined to treat this as an ordinary infectious disease. A lot of the plot energy is wrapped up in their effort to bring the truth to the people in spite of the government's oppression. In the final chapters, the shape of the future begins to emerge, and Bear shows us just enough of it to make it perhaps a little less frightening.

A strong effort by Bear, one of his most accessible books in spite of the heavy reliance on cutting-edge biology—there is even a glossary of microbiological terms. The emotional momentum of the main theme carries the reader along willy-nilly.

CODE OF CONDUCT
by Kristine Smith
Avon, $5.99 (mm)
ISBN: 0-380-80783-1

Smith's first novel stars the fugitive Jani, whose life changes when a former lover asks her to return to Earth to help investigate a murder among the ruling elite. Since the lover, Evan van Reuter, holds a position equivalent to prime minister, she accepts the assignment—even though all sorts of alarm bells are going off in her head.

Jani's professional specialty is the protection and handling of secure documents on which the complex interplanetary society depends. These documents are heavily influenced by an alien technology that uses imbedded chips, computer codes, and other complex means to make them confidential. It also becomes clear that Jani is a highly trained intelligence operative, with military combat skills and an array of secret weapons. She has been long listed as dead from an explosion that destroyed the vehicle in which she was riding. Reconstructed by advanced medical techniques (borrowed in part from the same aliens who supplied the document technology), she has been on the run for over a decade. The army and several government agencies want to try her for killing a superior officer who tried to force her to obey an illegal order.

Meanwhile, she has enough work to do. There are several rival political powers interested in the same murder she's investigating, and with ideas of their own on how to use the information she may uncover. The prime minister's staff is a hotbed of internal politics and turf-guarding, and almost everybody seems to have two or three agendas going at once. Her old alien mentor is on Earth as an ambassador, and looking for her with ends of his own in mind as well.

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The plot turns into a twisted maze of motives, and Smith milks the paranoid possibilities like an old pro. There's plenty of intrigue and hard-edged action, a well-portrayed far-future society, and a strong protagonist I suspect will be back for future engagements. I enjoyed this one a great deal, and hope Smith has plenty more like it to offer.

THE UFO ENIGMA: A New Review of the Physical Evidence
by Peter A. Sturrock
Warner, $23.95
ISBN: 0-446-52565-0

I am very much a skeptic on UFOs. I can hardly deny that there have been puzzling sightings over the years—I've seen a couple of strange things in the sky, myself. But even granting that there are things in the sky that we can't explain, the notion of visitors from some other world flitting around our night skies and playing pranks on humanity is silly. Nor do I buy the conspiracy theories that say we don't have good evidence because of some kind of cover-up. So I expected to give this book a cursory glance and find it to be another collection of woo-woo pop science. But despite my initial misgivings, the book was compelling. After reading the evidence Sturrock and his team of experts presented, I think that this book deserves to be taken seriously.

Sturrock, an astrophysicist at Stanford, was recruited by Laurance S. Rockefeller to conduct the study of which this book is a summary. In 1997, a panel of scientists assembled by Sturrock invited a number of experts to a conference where they presented the best evidence available on the subject. While their findings—as is made clear at the beginning—are far from conclusive, there is ample evidence that a solid core of cases fall outside the usual categories of mistaken identification of natural phenomena, delusion, or outright hoax.

Sturrock begins with a brief history of the phenomenon up to 1967, with a primary focus on incidents in the US, ending with brief summaries of the Colorado Project and the Condon Report, which represent the only investigation ever carried out under the auspices of a federal agency. While the scientific community as a whole paid next to no attention to the report, Sturrock came to feel that the subject should not be ignored. In 1982, he was among the founders of the Society for Scientific Exploration, which aims to provide a professional forum for study of topics ignored by mainstream science.

The conference of which this book is the summary examined several sorts of evidence, including photographs, radar contacts, reports of interference with vehicles and aircraft, traces on the ground and damage to vegetation, and analysis of debris. After hearing the evidence, the scientists concluded that the problem should receive more scientific attention, with an emphasis on physical evidence. There has been some convincing evidence from countries like France that have government agencies that have cooperated with investigators.

The final portion of the book gives several samples of cases that the scientists thought were particularly strong: a photo taken by a Canadian family on vacation; a French farmer's sighting, and the ground traces left by the object; and the accounts of a helicopter crew who encountered a UFO in Ohio, a sighting corroborated by ground witnesses. The book is not likely to make anyone a true believer, but I think many readers will come away from it convinced that there are genuine questions still to be answered, and that the usual sensible explanations will not work for all of them. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The spring convention season will be at our throats before we know it. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2000

28-30—**CapriCon.** For info, write: **Box 60085, Chicago IL 60660.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (E-mail) info@capricon.org. (Web) capricon.org. Con will be held in: Arlington Heights (Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Arlington Park Hilton. Guests will include: Larry Niven, Chris Luchini, Joe Stockman.

27-30—**FURther ConFusion. info@furtherconfusion.org.** Marriott, San Mateo CA. Furries/anthropomorphics.

28-30—**SuperCon. visi.com/~nstohlma/supercon/.** Rochester MN. Low-key relaxacon for Super Bowl weekend.

FEBRUARY 2000

4-6—**SheVaCon. (540) 886-2154. sheva@adelphia.net.** Airport Marriott, Roanoke VA. Tad Williams, Tina Thomas.

4-6—**Vulkon. (954) 441-8735. joemotes@aol.com. (Web) vulkon.com.** Raleigh NC. Commercial Star Trek event.

4-6—**WhoVention. whovention@eagles.com.au.** Rydges, No. Sydney. Sylvester McCoy, Sophie Aldred. Dr. Who.

4-6—**Love Is Murder. (847) 925-6593. ehopkins@harper.cc.il.us.** Embassy Suites, Schaumburg IL. Mysteries.

5-6—**Wolf 359: SG1. wolf359con@aol.com.** Heathrow Park, London England. Christopher Judge. StarGate One.

11-13—**KatsuCon, 4140 EBY Dr., Dumfries VA 22026. katsucon@katsucon.com.** Hyatt, Arlington VA. Anime.

11-13—**Starfleet Ball, 6 The Street, Sutton Waldron DT11 8NZ, UK. scoopx2@aol.com.** Moat House, Bournemouth

12-13—**Trek Celebration, 11916 W 109th #125, Overland Pk, KS 66210. (913) 327-8735** Champaign IL. Commercial con.

18-20—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. (Fax) 776-3243. boskone@nesfa.org.** Sheraton.

18-20—**Ad Astra, Box 7276 Sn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. ia@yorku.edu.** Primrose. Kress, Saberhagen, Sheffield.

18-20—**VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MO 65801. (417) 886-7219. junior@visioncon.net.** Clarion. Fred Gorham.

18-20—**JohnCon, OSA, 122 Merryman Hall, 3400 N Charles St., Baltimore MD 21218.** Johns Hopkins U. Gaming/SF.

18-21—**Gallifrey One, Box 3021, N Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-3756** Airtel, Van Nuys CA T. Dicks, Orman. Dr. Who.

18-21—**RadCon, 2527 W. Kennewick Ave. #162, Kennewick WA 99336. (509) 736-9540. jus1dave@gte.net.** S. Perry.

25-27—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. (412) 244-0456. parsechome@netcom.com.** Sheraton, Mars PA.

25-27—**AstronomiCon, Box 1701, Rochester NY 14603. ralston@aol.com.** Radisson Inn Airport. Back after hiatus.

25-27—**Fantasm, 67 Gail Dr., Athens GA 30606. info@fantasm.org. (Web) fantasm.org/home/.** Low-key party con.

25-27—**Potlatch, Box 31848, Seattle WA 98103. ianh@scn.org.** University Plaza Hotel. Focusing on written SF.

MARCH 2000

3-5—**Corflu, same contact & venue as Potlatch, held previous weekend, so just stay over.** Traditional-fanzine fandom.

3-5—**ConSonance, Box 8542, Berkeley CA 94707. rhiannon@arilinn.com.** San Francisco. SF/fantasy folksinging.

AUGUST 2000

31-Sep. 4—**ChiCon 2000, Box 642057, Chicago IL 60664.** Bova, Eggleton, Baen, Turtledove, Passovoy. WorldCon. $150.

AUGUST 2001

30-Sep. 3—**Millennium PhilCon, Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006.** Philadelphia PA. WorldCon. $135 membership.

AUGUST 2002

29-Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088.** San Jose CA. WorldCon. $100 for full attending membership.

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NEXT ISSUE

April marks our 22nd Anniversary, and we have some special treats in honor of the occasion. First, **Arthur C. Clarke**, one of the true giants of the field, contributes an insightful Guest Editorial, "The 21st Century: a (Very) Brief History." If you want a few shrewd clues as to what might await you in the new century ahead (some of it very surprising indeed!), if you want to try to blunt the edges of the Future Shock that's about to clobber us all, you'd better check this out!

APRIL COVER STORY

Then, for our April Cover Story, we examine a little-known portion of the life of Isaac Asimov! Scholars have long known that Isaac spent most of WW II working at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, in company with Robert A. Heinlein and L. Sprague de Camp, but just what all those famous writers were doing there is unclear (and, in fact, is still classified!). Now, in lieu of any actual facts, a unique collaborative team of top authors, consisting of **Eileen Gunn**, **Andy Duncan**, **Pat Murphy**, and **Michael Swanwick**, have come up with their own version of what those three giants of the field were doing there, and in the dazzlingly pyrotechnic "Green Fire," they launch Asimov and Heinlein off on the adventure of their lives, hurtling them through bizarre dimensions in an out-of-control teleporting battleship! Will Isaac and Bob solve this cosmic mystery before the fabric of reality unravels? Will they get eaten by sea-serpents, fried by an angry Aztec god, or have their throats slit by barebreasted Amazonian pirates? Can Isaac save the universe and still get back to reality in time to write the Foundation trilogy? Tune in and see! This wild romp is a great deal of fun, so don't miss it! The evocative cover painting is by **Nicholas Jainshigg**.

PLUS OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Prolific British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** takes us on a cosmic journey of mind-blowing scope and scale, including an awesome guided tour of "The Gravity Mine"; frequent contributor **Robert Reed** challenges a troubled near-future world with the alien teachings of "The Prophet Ugly"; new writer **Cory Doctorow** returns with an evocative portrait of a harried man "At Lightspeed, Slowing"; acclaimed British author **Brian Stableford** takes an unsettling look at the realities that may wait behind the reality we know, in the chilling "Regression"; and **Robert R. Chase** returns with an incisive look at the war between the sexes, how it started, and why it may never end, with a communique "From Mars and Venus."

AND OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column explains why "The Past Is In Front of Us"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column takes us to "Preservation Hall"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column slips us into "The Ring of Time"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstand on February 29, 2000, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe online, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up.

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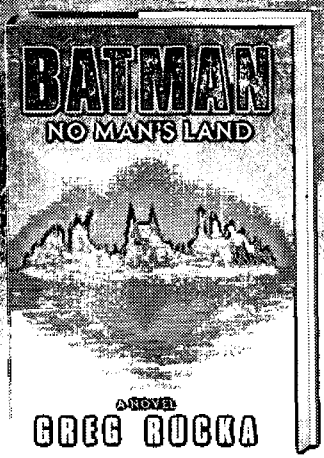

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